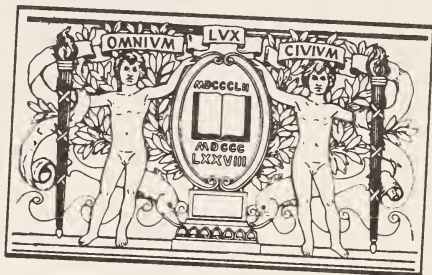


HEART'S CONTENT

*RALPH
HENRY
BARBOUR*





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"HE CERTAINLY ISN'T A TRAMP AND FROM THIS DISTANCE SEEMS QUITE GOOD-LOOKING. BERYL, I SCENT A ROMANCE!"

HEART'S CONTENT

By

RALPH HENRY BARBOUR

AUTHOR OF "KITTY OF THE ROSES", "THE HARBOR OF LOVE",
"LADY LAUGHTER", ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS IN COLOR BY

H. WESTON TAYLOR

AND DECORATIONS BY

EDWARD STRATTON HOLLOWAY



PHILADELPHIA & LONDON

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1915

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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I

A MAN and a dog trudged along a country road. On either side, beyond gray stone walls, meadows stretched gently upward to meet a warm blue sky. Afar a mowing-machine moved slowly against the horizon, and the chatter of its blades seemed to intensify the heat, like the midsummer rasping of a locust. All about was the fragrance of clover, of red clover knee-deep in the ripe meadows, of alsike clover hugging the lichened walls, of white clover, shy and lowly, peering from the wild tangle along the way. Milkweed was adding pale mauve shadows to its delicate green, self-heal bravely defied the dust with purple

blooms, and up the walls the bindweed was shooting its green arrows and tinkling its triumph on pinky bells. It was June in New England.

The man was lean and well-conditioned, in height somewhat over the average, in years somewhat under thirty. He had a good-looking, tanned face, a pair of merry red-brown eyes, and a mouth which, unhidden by a closely-cropped mustache, was oddly at variance with the eyes, being straight and firm and serious. He was dressed for the road: gray flannel Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, puttees, stout tan shoes, and a light cloth cap pushed to the back of his head. There was a pack between his shoulders, a pipe between his teeth, and a stick in one brown hand.

The dog, who all the morning had padded along with his nose at the man's heels, was white—save for the dust that had settled on him—with occasional patches of fawn. He was frankly a mongrel, long of muzzle and leg, with a bullet-shaped head and a heavy tail, which, in spite of the short hair on the rest of

the body, showed a disposition to feather. He possessed one good ear and the scant remains of another. For the rest, he seemed serious-minded and contemplative, and had evidently lived long enough to have discovered the vanity of many things. Not for him the wild scurry after elusive chipmunks, not for him the idle, exhausting excursion into woods and fields. Mysterious rustlings beside the road produced in him no agitation. Steadily, somnolently, with drooping tail and half-closed eyes, he plodded along after the man, his dust-covered muzzle just escaping the dust-covered heels.

Over the brow of a little rise appeared a buggy drawn by a nodding gray horse and containing a man in a wide straw hat. He was a wearied, discouraged-looking man in the forties, with sun-bleached whiskers and watery blue eyes.

“Good morning,” greeted the man on foot, and the gray horse stopped of his own volition. “A fine day, sir.”

The man in the buggy looked about him, as though unwilling to hazard an opinion without

first fully informing himself on the facts. At last—

“Pretty hot,” he objected.

“It is warm,” the other agreed cheerfully.

“Do you live about here?”

He had a deeply mellow voice, a pleasant voice, and he spoke as though the possession of it—or of any voice—was something to be glad of. And as he spoke a smile hovered about his mouth and in and out of his eyes, and the farmer, who had made his first reply with the hostile suspicion of the New Englander accosted by a stranger, relaxed mentally and physically. He raised a thumb in the direction of his shoulder. “About a mile or so back,” he answered.

“Then, perhaps you can help me. You see”—the traveller seemed then to take the other into his confidence with a glance and a smile—“I am looking for a house.”

“A house?” The farmer digested it slowly. At last, “To live in?” he asked.

“And die in,” responded the traveller, gayly.

The other shook his head slowly. “There

ain't any houses for sale around here just now," he said. "Nor none for rent neither. There was a place——"

"Perhaps I should explain that it is not just *any* house that I am looking for, but a—*a particular* house. I thought that perhaps you might have come across it, might be able to direct me to it."

The farmer looked puzzled. "Who lives in it?" he asked.

The traveller spread his hands. "I don't know. Perhaps it is unoccupied. It is a small house, white, with green blinds. It stands a little way back from the road, and looks with friendly windows over a hedge. Beside the path there are, I think——" The traveller half closed his eyes, then nodded reassuringly—— "Yes, there are flower-beds bordered with box; and at one side there is a garden, a sunny, tangled garden of old-fashioned flowers: hollyhock and gillyflowers and bleeding-heart and sweet alyssum and many others. It is filled with the song of birds and the drone of bees. And—I would call your especial attention to this—there is a dove-cot with



honeysuckle clambering around it. It is called——”

“A dove caught?” interrupted the other.

“A dove-cot,” corrected the other gently.

“C, o, t; meaning——”

“A pigeon-house, likely.”

“Quite likely. Can you direct me to it?”

The farmer shook his head, observing the traveller sideways with suspicious gaze.

“There ain’t any such place around these parts,” he declared emphatically. “Maybe at Alderbury——”

“Alderbury?” mused the other, savoring the word. “Alderbury? Yes, that has a pleasant sound. And how far is Alderbury?”

“About four miles, I guess. There’s places there with gardens. Didn’t they give you any address?”

“No, and I have sought it many years.”

The farmer gathered up his reins, looking hard and mistrustfully at the man in the road.

“Well,” he muttered, “I hope you find it. When you do, though, I guess them friendly windows’ll have bars on ’em! Get ap!”

“I forgot to tell you,” said the other hope-



fully, as the old horse jogged resignedly on, "that it is called 'Heart's Content.' "

There was no answer. The man in the buggy seemed anxious to be gone. The traveller watched the receding vehicle in silence for a minute as it creaked on its way. Then he filled his pipe, lighted it, and glanced at his watch. It lacked a few minutes of eleven. After that he turned to the dog, who, seated at the edge of the road with a pink tongue much in evidence, was observing him gravely.

"Alderbury," said the man reflectively, blowing a cloud of smoke into the air. The dog thudded the dust with his tail.

"Alderbury?" repeated the man questioningly. "Yes, it has a pleasant sound, a—a suggestive sound. It suggests—h'm—yes, it suggests luncheon." The dog's tail thumped harder. "Ah, that interests you, does it, Old Sobersides? Then, forward, my brave comrade, to Alderbury—and 'Heart's Content'!"

With a flourish of his stick, and whistling a tune between the teeth that held the pipe, the man took up his journey, and the dog, trotting to his place again, plodded along behind.



II

“I HAVEN’T the slightest idea of the time,” remarked Mrs. Vernon, pausing with buffer in hand to examine the effect of her labors on five pink finger-nails. She had very pretty hands, knew it, and was proud of it, just as she was proud of the fact that at forty-three her hair held no tell-tale strands of white, that her figure was still young and graceful, and that, in short, she was scarcely less attractive than when at the age of the girl of twenty who, stretched at length in the willow chaise-lounge across the porch, was idly glancing at the watch on her wrist.

“It is twenty-two minutes past twelve,”

said Beryl Vernon. She slowly dropped the magazine she had been reading to her lap, and watched her mother as, flanked by bowls and jars and all the paraphernalia of the manicure, she industriously flourished the buffer. "I don't see, Mama," she added presently, "why you don't let Jennie do your nails."

"Because I like to do them myself, Beryl." Mrs. Vernon held a hand to the light, caught sight of a flaw in the perfection of the work, frowned lightly, and seized an orange-stick. "One must do something to lighten the monotony of life in—in a house of mourning."

It was the girl's turn to frown. "I don't think you need to talk that way, Mama," she replied, mildly resentful.

"It's the way I feel," said Mrs. Vernon cheerfully. "With your father chained in Washington to a Bill, and no one in sight from one day's end to another, my dear"—she shrugged a pair of graceful shoulders—"I think 'house of mourning' just describes it."

"What—what do you want me to do?" asked Beryl.

Mrs. Vernon polished silently for a moment.

“Well, even if you don’t care to encourage callers, you might at least not bite their heads off when they do come, which, goodness knows, is seldom enough!”

“Mama! ‘Bite their heads off’!”

“Metaphorically speaking, my dear.”

“Please, whose head have I bit—bit—ten——”

“Bitten, I think,” said her mother helpfully.

“Bitten off, then?” persisted Beryl, with some spirit.

“Well, still speaking in metaphors, you quite decapitated that Russell boy, and at least partially beheaded George Smith.”

“Tiresome, smirky old thing,” murmured Beryl.

“He is tiresome, my dear. No one knows it better than I do, since on the occasion of his last call I had to entertain him for nearly an hour while you coddled an imaginary headache upstairs.”

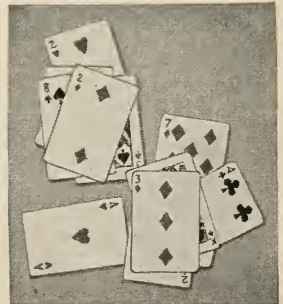
“It would have been real enough if I’d stayed down here,” replied Beryl with a smile, closely followed by a sigh.



Mrs. Vernon looked slightly aggrieved. "Oh, it's all very well for you, Beryl. You are old and past the taste for frivolities, but I am young and pine for the pleasure of occasional discourse with some one besides Perkins or Jennie or, if you will forgive me, you. I pine, too, for a rubber of auction—or even whist would be wildly exciting. I am heartily sick of Canfield. I've played it so much that I awake in the night to find myself putting imaginary red deuces on black trays. I even had the nightmare once when I dreamed that all four aces were buried under the seventh pile, and that a miserable red queen without an affinity in the pack was holding them down!"

Beryl laughed amusedly. "Poor Mama! Did her hard-hearted daughter scare all the mens away from her?"

"I could do without men, my dear, if there was even a woman in sight, and you know there isn't. I've used up most of the paper in the house writing invitations to folks, and not a single victim have I caught. Everybody has a son graduating somewhere, it seems. Next



month they'll be simply delighted to visit us, but just at present——” Mrs. Vernon gazed startledly at her daughter. “My dear, it just occurs to me that if I don't do something to head them off, at least a dozen women and two dozen wardrobe trunks will descend on us in July!”

“Horrors! Please do something!”

“Of course I'm very fond of Alderbury,” mused Mrs. Vernon, attaching lids to various jars and boxes, “and I love this place, but I do think it's a mistake to come here out of the season. Except for the Norrises and ourselves and a man or two at the Country Club, there isn't a human being in miles.”

“I'm sorry you find it so dull, dear,” responded Beryl. “After this, I'll be as nice as pie to every one—even Mr. Smith.”

“Well, as for Mr. Smith——”

“Since I dragged you out here so early, I suppose I must provide amusement for you, Mama. Shall we give a dinner for the Norrises and a few of the men—including Mr. Smith?”

“Hardly a dinner just yet, I think. But I

do think you might take a little more interest in things—and people, Beryl. Your attitude is absurd for a girl of your age.”

“It’s a very comfortable attitude,” murmured Beryl.

“You know what I mean,” responded her mother, trying to look severe. When she made such attempts she lowered her head a little and seemed to be looking over a pair of imaginary glasses, which led one to suspect that, possibly, in the seclusion of her room, when the print was very fine—but I may be doing the lady an injustice. “You’ve had a—an unpleasant experience, my dear, but it happened a whole year ago—very nearly—and it is wrong to deliberately let it sour you, and that’s just what you are doing, or trying to do. Instead——”

“An unpleasant experience!” repeated Beryl bitterly. “You speak very moderately, Mama. When a girl has given her whole heart to a man, only to find him worthless——”

“Fiddlesticks! No man is worthless, and certainly not Kenneth Leeds. There’s a great deal that’s admirable in him. Certainly no

man could have behaved in a nicer, more manly way when you broke the engagement. It was a mistake——”

“I’d rather not talk about it, please,” begged her daughter.

“There’s no reason why you shouldn’t talk about it after a year,” persisted Mrs. Vernon resolutely. “If you’d talked more about it and not just crawled into your shell, like—like one of those things that have shells, you’d have been far more sensible. As for giving your whole heart, you did nothing of the sort. I don’t want to hurt you, Beryl, but you are not behaving fairly to either your father or to me in persisting in—in this attitude of yours. It—it’s most uncomfortable for every one. Of course I don’t say that you didn’t care for Mr. Leeds. Had you married him, I’ve no doubt that you’d have cared a great deal. But it’s positively wrong and wicked to insist, to deliberately try to make yourself believe, that your heart is broken and your life wrecked. Good gracious, child, how many women do you suppose there are who are married to their first sweethearts?”

“But the—the ignominy, Mama, of discovering that—that the man you care for——”

“Is very sensibly interested in your *dot*? My dear, if you had not been blinded by sentiment——”

“Why shouldn't I have been? Aren't girls allowed to have sentiment any more? How was I to know that he cared nothing for me, but only for the money to be settled on him?”

“Well, you knew he was English,” murmured Mrs. Vernon.

“And then”—Beryl shuddered—“to have to—to break it off like that at the eleventh hour! To read all the horrid things the newspapers printed and to hear the nasty, mean things that people—yes, and one's very dearest friends—said about it! It—oh, it's enough to make you hate every one! And as for men—no, you are right; my heart is not broken, Mama. But—but I think my pride is.”

After a moment Mrs. Vernon said gently: “A pride that is broken so easily, dear, is hardly worth having, I think. As for what people said”—she shrugged her shoulders philosophically—“it was only what people

always do say and always will say. It's human nature—not the best part of it, but still human nature, dear. People envied you a brilliant marriage, envied your father's wealth that made such a marriage possible, envied you for your attractions and your youth and your happiness. And when the upset came they were glad of it—for a moment—and didn't hesitate to show it. Now that it is over, they are ready to be friends again."

"Never!"

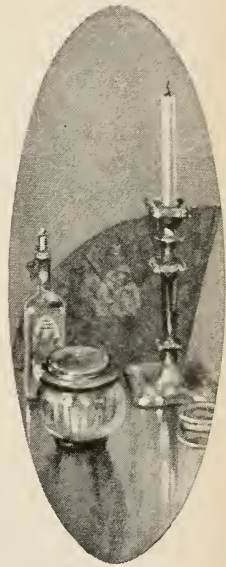
"When you are older, Beryl, you'll discover that we have to take our friends as they come, with all their faults, or go without."

"I prefer to go without."

"Just now, perhaps," responded Mrs. Vernon quietly; "but later you will find that friends are very necessary, and you will be ready to accept them as the Lord made them, forgiving them many things for the good that is there, besides. We are all very imperfect, Beryl. I suppose that's the only thing that makes any of us lovable."

Mrs. Vernon folded her towels thoughtfully and sighed. Beryl gazed into the sun-smitten

garden beyond the porch with troubled, mutinous eyes. They were very beautiful eyes, truly violet in color, and they looked out of a warmly-hued oval face whose loveliness was proof against even the expression of discontent that rested upon it. Beryl Vernon had all the soft and quiet beauty of her mother, plus a certain more stately quality which had been her father's contribution. Senator Whittier Vernon was still, at fifty-five, the handsomest man in the Senate. Without being much above ordinary height, the Senator impressed the world as being a tall man, and this faculty he had passed on to his daughter. Beryl was no more than an inch above her mother in stature, yet looked much taller. But you are not to accept the impression that she was a haughty, imperious beauty. She was too much like the elder woman to be that. There was a grace and liveness in the rounded but still slender form that prevailed against any tendency to statuesqueness, while the features, although almost ideally regular, were far more haughty. The face was warm, even vivid, and one would have sworn that the



present troubled gloom in the soft eyes and the self-pitying droop of the red lips were far from natural there.

“While we are talking of—of this, Beryl,” Mrs. Vernon continued presently, “I think perhaps I might as well tell you of something that Eugenia White wrote me a day or two ago. She says that Mr. Leeds is engaged. Pittsburgh girl—I forget the name—whom he met on the other side.” Mrs. Vernon, without seeming to, watched her daughter’s face very closely. The expression changed very little, and there was only a hint of bitterness in the voice that responded, after a brief pause:

“I hope he will be happy.”

Mrs. Vernon sighed her relief very gently and went on more cheerfully. “I think the name is Schwartz or—well, it was German, I’m certain. Eugenia says the family has a great deal of money. Steel, I presume. One always associates Pittsburgh with steel, doesn’t one? They are to be married on this side in the autumn.”

“Do you suppose,” asked Beryl musingly, “he really cares—this time, Mama?”

Mrs. Vernon shrugged slightly. The movement was becoming to her, and she often indulged in it. "My dear, Englishmen have extraordinary command over their emotions, and whether he is really in love with the girl or not, no one but he will ever know. Surely it must be almost time for luncheon? Not that I am hungry, but life here just now is so much like life on shipboard that meal-time is an event of exciting magnitude! I must call Jennie to take these things——" Mrs. Vernon's voice trailed away into silence. Then, "Now, who do you suppose that may be?" she asked softly.

The living-porch was at the end of the house, the only feature not strictly in accord with its artfully artless Colonialism, but from it one commanded the white trellised gate set in the high hedge that enclosed the place, and Beryl, following her mother's gaze, saw a man leaning upon the gate. He held a pipe in his mouth and seemed to be dreamily regarding the house. Beside him, visible through the pickets, was a rather dirty white dog.



III

PRESENTLY, as the observer at the gate neither entered nor retired, Mrs. Vernon turned questioningly to her daughter. Beryl smiled her own mystification and shook her head. If the man saw them, he paid them no heed. He only puffed at his pipe and slowly, contemplatively gazed over the house and about the garden before him. The dog laid himself down on the gravel and apparently went to sleep.

“He certainly isn’t a tramp,” said Mrs. Vernon softly. “And—and from this distance he seems quite good-looking. Beryl, I scent romance!”

“If you don't behave, I shall telegraph Papa to come home instantly,” replied Beryl, with a murmured laugh. “He has a pack on his back, hasn't he? Perhaps he has laces and spools of cotton and things to sell.”

Mrs. Vernon shook her head, still gazing intently. “I wish he had. A peddler would be absolutely exciting. But he isn't that. He—he looks like a gentleman, Beryl.”

“Some of them do, dear. There was the one who came here two years ago and sold Jennie a piece of edging and walked off with a brand-new wringer. Is he coming in?”

“Coming in? No, he has apparently gone to sleep there. You don't suppose he is—is intoxicated, do you?” Mrs. Vernon glanced nervously around, as though seeking to arm herself. Nothing, however, more formidable than a cuticle-knife presented itself to her gaze. At that moment the man at the gate gave the lie to the assumption that he was asleep, by removing the pipe from between his teeth, knocking the ashes from it, and returning it to his mouth.

“Perhaps,” murmured Mrs. Vernon, “I'd

better send Perkins to see what he wants."

"Nonsense, dear! He isn't doing any harm."

"But—but I want to know!" declared Mrs. Vernon. "Besides, the apparition of a real man about the place is distinctly—well, exhilarating! Do you suppose we might invite him to luncheon, Beryl?"

"I've no doubt he'd appreciate it," Beryl laughed. "He certainly isn't dressed like a tramp—nor a peddler. Those trousers are very well cut, and he wears puttees. I'll tell you what he is, Mama; he's an artist. You know artists are absolutely irresponsible, dear; just the sort of folks to go to sleep over one's front gate."

"I believe he is! I think—yes, I think I'll go down and speak to him."

"Mama! Well, anyhow, don't ask him to luncheon, will you? Artists always have terrible appetites, and I'm not sure that we have enough to satisfy him. Shall I go along to protect you?"

"No, he is my discovery, Beryl! Hands off! But you might just—just sort of watch

things, dear. If he tries to get in, please ring for Perkins." And Mrs. Vernon, unconsciously patting her hair, stepped down on to the grass and turned toward the walk. Beryl followed her smilingly with her eyes.

"Poor Mama!" she thought. "I suppose I have been selfish."

The stranger apparently did not sense Mrs. Vernon's approach until her footsteps, inaudible on the grass, crunched the gravel of the front path. Then, bringing his gaze slowly down from the upper story of the house, he saw her, and lifted the cap from the back of his head, bowing so—well, so hospitably over the gate that for an instant the absurd delusion held her that she and not he was the intruder! If she had expected him to withdraw with a proper show of confusion, she was doomed to disappointment, for he only watched her approach with a sort of eager tranquillity. And then, just as she was about to ask him if there was anything she could do for him, he spoke.

"Madam," he said, cap in hand, "I thank you. You demonstrate the truth of one of my favorite theories."

Mrs. Vernon gasped. "Bless the man!" she exclaimed. "What's he talking about?"

"I beg your pardon," he laughed. "It is a failing of mine, I fear, to begin a conversation in the middle. But, after all, preliminaries are usually tiresome, don't you think?"

"Preliminaries? Theories?" She observed him bewilderedly. "Are you quite sane, sir?"

"I hope not," he replied soberly, with, however, a twinkle in his eyes. "I've always found absolute, uncompromising sanity to be deadly dull."

Mrs. Vernon smiled doubtfully. "Perhaps; but—I fear I don't quite understand your cause for gratitude."

"I have always held that a dwelling should reflect the personality of its owner. Don't you think that reasonable?"

"If you say *should* and not *does*," replied the lady. "But in what way, if you please, have I—I believe you said demonstrated——"

"Yes. You see, I had been for some time observing your house, admiring it, finding it, in fact, utterly congruous, distinctly charming. And then at the very moment I reached my



verdict, you appeared. In gratitude for having my theory so admirably justified, I thanked you."

Mrs. Vernon blinked. "I—my dear man, is that intended for a compliment?"

"Would it not be a waste of breath to pay a compliment to a house?" he asked with a smile.

"Oblige me, please, by putting your hat on," said the lady, a trifle severely. "If what I suspect is really the case, you are in danger of aggravating your trouble by remaining bareheaded."

The stranger smiled. "I am, madam, neither a lunatic nor a victim to sunstroke. I am merely a—a would-be tenant searching for a house."

"Then I fear you are wasting your time about Alderbury. To my certain knowledge, there are no houses for rent here. As you see, it is only a settlement, hardly even a village, and——"

"I should perhaps explain that I am not looking for just any house, madam, but for a particular house. And, since I find Alderbury

very pleasing, I was hoping to discover my house somewhere about here."

"Am I to understand that the house is already your property?" asked Mrs. Vernon puzzledly.

"By no means. I have never seen it. I am still searching for it. You see before you a wanderer in search of a home. I might say"—he turned to glance at the dog beside him—"I might say two wanderers in search of a home. The house I am looking for is a small white house with green blinds. It stands a little way back from the road"—his gaze travelled past Mrs. Vernon and rested upon the cottage—"and looks over the top of a hedge, with friendly windows." He glanced approvingly at the hedge. "In front there are beds of flowers bordered with box." He looked down and nodded his satisfaction. "At one side"—and his glance turned toward the enclosed garden—"there is a sunny tangle of flowers—old-fashioned flowers such as heliotrope and bleeding-heart and alyssum and hollyhocks and—and"—he craned his head a little—"Canterbury bells. The garden is



filled with the song of birds and the drone of bees, and in it stands——” He faltered, stopped. A puzzled look came into his face. He turned to Mrs. Vernon almost accusingly.

“Where, madam, is the dove-cot?”

“The dove-cot?”

“In the garden, yes. I don’t see it. It should have honeysuckle climbing about it.”

Mrs. Vernon viewed the garden blankly and then the man, and there was a note of apology in her voice as she stammered:

“There isn’t any dove-cot!” Then, impatient with herself for the momentary sense of dereliction, she added with asperity, “Besides, I don’t see as it matters, sir, as this place is not for sale.”

“Oh!” He spoke regretfully. “Then, it is not called ‘Heart’s Content’?”

“It is not. It isn’t called anything!”

The stranger made no reply for a moment. His gaze roamed again about house and garden, and finally travelled back to Mrs. Vernon. He sighed. “I feared it was not the place,” he said, “when I noted the absence of the dove-cot. I am sorry. It is a very

lovely place and——” He paused, his eyes going back to the cottage. “You are quite certain it is not called ‘Heart’s Content’?”

“Bless the man! Don’t you suppose I know the name of my own house?” demanded Mrs. Vernon.

“Yes?” he replied, gravely interested. “And the name is——”

“It hasn’t any.” Mrs. Vernon’s voice sounded ludicrously flat.

The stranger smiled. “Ah, you see, then, you don’t know! And so perhaps it is ‘Heart’s Content,’ after all, and the place I am looking for.” But there was a want of assurance in his tone which was explained when he added dejectedly, “were it not for the fact that the dove-cot is missing——” Then he brightened. “But perhaps it has been taken down, stored away somewhere,” he suggested eagerly.

“Nonsense! There never was a dove-cot, and it is not called ‘Heart’s Content,’ and——”

“I believe you are right,” returned the man. “It is not ‘Heart’s Content.’ Pray pardon my



stupidity. But you are wrong, madam, in saying that it has no name."

"Well, really——" began Mrs. Vernon.

"It's name is 'Solana.' "

The stranger removed his cap, bowed smilingly, and went on along the road. At his heels plodded the dog.





IV

“OF course,” said Mrs. Vernon, at the luncheon-table, “the man was quite crazy, but——”

“He couldn’t have been,” replied Beryl, “since he owned to it. Insane folks invariably protest their sanity, don’t they?”

“Well, if he wasn’t crazy, will you please tell me what he was up to? The idea of hanging over our gate and insisting that this place was called ‘Heart’s Content’! If that isn’t a sign of insanity, then I don’t know!”

“‘Heart’s Content,’” mused Beryl. “But, really, Mama, that’s a very sweet name for a home isn’t it?”

“Perhaps; but—— The asparagus, please. Besides, he almost made me think for a moment that this might really be his house! And when he insisted on having a dove-cot I was nearly ready to order one at once!”

Beryl laughed. “I fear, Mama, he was ‘stringing you,’ as the boys say.”

“And you say he talked like a gentleman?” pursued Beryl.

“He *was* a gentleman,” avowed Mrs. Vernon. “And that’s what makes it all so—so ridiculous and puzzling. He was very good-looking, too, with quite wonderful red-brown eyes. They say insane people always have peculiar eyes, don’t they?”

“Perhaps; but insanity wouldn’t account for the color of them, would it?”

“I suppose not.” Mrs. Vernon sighed. “Well, I fancy I ought to be grateful to him for affording excitement to a poor lonely grass-widow. Only—well, it does make me angry to have folks do things I can’t understand. If he will come back and explain why he is wandering around the country with a disreputable dog, paying compliments to

strange ladies over front gates and talking about white houses with friendly windows and hollyhocks and—and dove-cots—what *is* a dove-cot, Beryl?"

"Why, a house on a pole for pigeons, Mama. You've seen them in England."

"Then, why didn't he say a pigeon-house? I supposed that was what he meant, but I wasn't sure. Well, if he will come back and tell me what it all means I—I'll set up a dove-cot for him!"

"Anyhow, it's nice that we have a name for our place at last, Mama. We can thank him for that, at least."

"Not—not 'Heart's Content'!" protested Mrs. Vernon.

"Oh, no," laughed Beryl; "the other—'Solana.' I think that is perfectly dear, don't you?"

"Um; it sounds nice. What does it mean?"

"I suppose"—Beryl wrinkled her forehead—"I suppose it means a sunny place, Mama. Anyhow, I like it. I shall order some paper at once."

"Very well, dear."



Mrs. Vernon ate in silence for awhile. Then—

“Did I tell you that he had a—a most pleasing voice, Beryl?” she asked.

Beryl shook her head. “I think you neglected that particular,” she replied very soberly.

“Well, he had,” sighed Mrs. Vernon. Then, glancing up to find her daughter regarding her laughingly, “Oh, bother the man and his dove-cot!” she exclaimed.

Nearly a week later, on just such another sunny morning, they were seated again on the porch. To-day, however, Mrs. Vernon and Beryl were not alone, for a middle-aged man in riding-clothes leaned from a chair and flicked Mrs. Vernon's Pomeranian, Cliquot, with the end of a crop, much to that fluffy aristocrat's disgust. George Smith would not approve of being called middle-aged, for he made an earnest and studied effort to convince the world that he was still a gay young dog. His rather colorless hair was fast beating a retreat from the neighborhood of a thin, long nose, and his pale blue eyes looked flat



and dull; but his mustache was youthfully brown and his constant smile—which Beryl called a smirk—lent his countenance a certain fictitious animation. He was a bachelor who was always on the point of abandoning his state and had never done so, and a man of whom perhaps the worst that could be said was that he was tiresome. At present his attentions to Cliquot were visibly disturbing both to the dog and to his mistress, and each, I think, emitted a sigh of relief when he straightened up, throwing one russet boot over a whipcord knee, and turned to Mrs. Vernon.

“And what,” he asked solicitously, “do you hear from the Senator, dear lady?”

“Scarcely anything. He seems even too busy to write.”

Beryl smiled. “Unless,” she said, “Mama gets at least twelve pages twice a week, she wires Father to ask what the matter is!”

Mrs. Vernon laughed. “Twelve pages of Mr. Vernon’s writing is not what it sounds, Mr. Smith. If he manages to get twenty words on a page, he is doing wonderfully well.

I tell him it is a fortunate thing that he was not John Hancock. If he had been, there'd have been no room on the Declaration of Independence for the other signers!"

"The Senator, dear lady, is a big man even on paper! And speaking of handwriting reminds me"—George Smith thrust a hand into the inner pocket of his jacket and drew out a crumpled paper. "What do you think of that for a fist, Mrs. Vernon? They say Horace Greeley couldn't read his own writing after the ink was dry, but I'll wager this chap has him beat!" He passed the paper to Mrs. Vernon, who spread it out and gazed at it puzzledly.

"Is it—is it really writing?" she asked. "I mean, does it say anything?"

Mr. Smith chuckled. "Let Miss Vernon try it," he suggested.

"I can read the first part beautifully," said Beryl. "'Alderbury Country Club.'"

"Yes, but that's printed," chuckled Mr. Smith. "Now go on."

"Er—'Joe pat . . . misery'—no, 'mystery'— Gracious! Is it in code?"

“Not a bit of it. It says—may I have it, please? It says: ‘I’ve put myself up here for luncheon. Thanks. But why tin bullets in new peas?’ ”

“And what on earth does it mean?” asked Mrs. Vernon.

Mr. Smith chuckled again. It was so seldom that he interested an audience that he was palpably delighted. “I’ll tell you. I happened to find it in the letter-box at the club this morning. It had been there since last week—Thursday, I think they said. I don’t look for mail very often. If I find anything, it’s so likely to require an answer, you know; and I hate to write letters.” Mr. Smith announced the fact as though it was an entirely original failing. “Well, this is from Allan Shortland. It isn’t signed, you see. He never signs his letters; doesn’t have to; you can’t mistake ’em!”

“Shortland?” mused Mrs. Vernon. “There were some Shortlands in Washington a few years ago. I think they were from Wisconsin or—or somewhere out there.”

“A different lot, I fancy,” replied Mr.

Smith. "This chap's folks come from Virginia, I believe. I thought perhaps you had met him, Miss Vernon."

Beryl shook her head. "I don't think so," she replied. "Who is he?"

"Why—er—" Mr. Smith chuckled again—"well, he's a queer duffer. Rather crazy in a harmless way. Folks are all dead, and he has rather a nice lot of money. Most—er—most original chap."

"Really?" encouraged Mrs. Vernon, smothering a yawn.

"His writing is certainly original," agreed Beryl.

"Rather! And his writing's just like the chap himself. I ran against him first in Paris some ten years ago. He was studying art then. Any way, he said he was. I don't think he ever did anything with it. He told me once that his father had intended him to be a lawyer. I forgot why he didn't. He had some crazy reason. He spends most of his time knocking around. He's been about everywhere, I guess. His favorite loafing-place is China. Says the Chinese are the only folks

who really understand how to live. He's written two or three books, mostly travels. One was a novel, though. I never tackled the travel books, but I did have a go at the novel. It was funny stuff; didn't have any—what-do-you-call-it—plot. I supposed he was abroad somewhere until I came across this note. They said at the club that he wandered in there one day last week and asked to see the membership list. Then he asked for a card, filled it out himself, and signed my name—I was away that day—and had lunch. Hendricks, the manager over there, thought he was a tramp at first, and——”

Mrs. Vernon sat up suddenly. “What day was it, Mr. Smith?” she demanded.

“Er—I think they said last Thursday.”

Mrs. Vernon thought back rapidly and turned a triumphant look on her daughter. “Then—then, it was!” she exclaimed.

“Of course,” laughed Beryl. “As you didn't ask him to luncheon here, he went to the club. You see, Mr. Smith, Mama has met your Mr.—Mr.——”

“Shortland? Really? I say!”



“He wanted to buy the place,” said Mrs. Vernon plaintively, “but there was no pigeon-house——”

“Dove-cot,” corrected Beryl gravely.

—“And so he didn’t. He said he was looking for a white house with green blinds, named ‘Heart’s Content,’ and rather insisted that this was it. Then he decided it wasn’t—on account of the dove-cot, I suppose—and went away.”

Mr. Smith had been chuckling at intervals, and now he slapped a boot ecstatically with his riding-crop. “That’s ‘China’ all right!” he declared.

“‘China’?” echoed Beryl.

“They call him ‘China’ at the club in New York. He’s always just going there or just coming from there, you see. He—he’s a queer one! Fine feller, too. Every one——”

“Mama was quite smitten with him. Tell Mr. Smith about his eyes and his voice, dear.”

“Well, I don’t suppose you’d call him handsome,” defended Mr. Smith, “but——”

“I thought him very good-looking,” declared Mrs. Vernon, with decision. “And now



that you reassure me as to his sanity, I should like to know him. I especially want to know why he insists on a dove-cot. Personally, I think pigeons are frightfully dirty things."

"Not half bad *en casserole*," chuckled Smith.

"Perhaps he means to raise squabs," Beryl suggested.

"There's no telling," said Smith delightfully. "He—he's a queer duffer."

"I found him most amusing," said Mrs. Vernon. "When you see him, Mr. Smith, please don't fail to ask him whether he found his house with the hollyhocks and the friendly windows, and the dove-cot. And do find out why the dove-cot. And do let me know."

"I think," said Beryl, who was facing the road, in a queerly subdued voice, "you can find all that out yourself, Mama."

Mrs. Vernon and Mr. Smith turned and followed the direction of Beryl's gaze. Over the gate leaned a man with a pipe in his mouth, dreamily regarding the house. Beside him was a rather dirty white dog.



V

“By Jove!” said Mr. Smith.

“It really is!” exclaimed Mrs. Vernon.

“Beryl, he’s come back for the house!”

“You forget there’s no dove-cot,” laughed the girl softly.

“I say, may I bring him in?” asked Mr. Smith eagerly.

“By all means,” replied his hostess. “But perhaps the dog——” She glanced apprehensively at the slumbering Cliquot.

“I’ll ask him to leave the brute outside,” said Mr. Smith, nimbly dodging a hydrangea in a tub. “He may not come, you know. You never can tell. He—he’s a queer——”

But Mr. Smith disappeared for a moment around the corner of the house just then, and the rest of his remark was lost. The ladies watched and listened. It was quite still, and the greetings of the two men were plainly audible.

“Hello, old chap! Just talking about you, you know! How are you?”

They saw Allan Shortland's gaze fall slowly from the upper part of the house and rest on the approaching Smith. A smile came to his face, and he reached a hand over the top of the gate.

“I wouldn't have mentioned them, Smith, but I happened to break a tooth on one. I've been wondering since if they grew the things on a battle-field.”

The ladies on the porch exchanged amused glances. Mr. Smith was holding the gate open and talking volubly, but his words were indistinguishable. It was, however, evident that the man outside was demurring. Mr. Smith laid an impelling hand on his arm. At last the traveller removed his pack and hung it on the gate. Then he took off his cap and slapped

the dust from his coat. Then the gate closed behind them, leaving a disconsolate dog on the further side, and a moment later the two men stepped on to the porch. Mr. Smith advanced with the air of an animal-tamer leading a trained lion.

“Here’s the chap himself, Mrs. Vernon! Mr. Shortland, Mrs. Vernon; and Miss Vernon. Funny thing we should be just talking about you, Shortland!”

“Have you come back to claim our house, Mr. Shortland?” asked Mrs. Vernon as she shook hands.

Allan Shortland smiled. “There are certain changes I should have to insist on, madam.” He turned to Beryl. “Miss Vernon and I,” he said as he took her hand, “have met before.” He looked intently at the girl for what seemed a long while after he released her hand, his regard frankly and gravely interested. Beryl’s color deepened a little as she turned to reseat herself.

“I think not, Mr. Shortland,” she answered.

His smile deepened. “Some day I’ll recall the circumstances.” He accepted the chair

that Mr. Smith pushed forward, and turned again to Mrs. Vernon. "It is very kind of you to ask me in," he continued. "I ought to, I suppose, apologize for my condition. Your roads are very dusty, and Dobbin and I are scarcely presentable."

"Dobbin?" questioned Smith.

"My companion." He nodded in the direction of the gate. "I call him Dobbin."

"But—I thought," hazarded Mrs. Vernon rather blankly, "that Dobbin was a horse's name."

Shortland nodded. "I dare say. It happened to be the first name that occurred to me, and he answered to it. I have since discovered that he answers to any other name quite as readily, but that may be owing to his amiability. He's a very amiable dog."

"Where the deuce did you get hold of such an ugly brute?" asked Smith, with a laugh.

"I didn't. That is—well, he got hold of me. It happened some days ago—I forget just when—or where. There were some green apples in a yard. I am very fond of green apples." He was addressing Mrs. Vernon

particularly, and his tone plainly said, "You, of course, will understand that." Mrs. Vernon nodded sympathetically, as though green apples were a secret passion with her. "I stepped into the yard and was about to help myself when Dobbin appeared from nowhere and put his teeth around my ankle." He looked reminiscently at the ankle in question. "Then was the beginning of our acquaintance."

"Well, I say, what happened then?" prompted Mr. Smith. Shortland appeared to consider the tale at an end.

"Then?" he asked. "Oh, then I argued with him——"

"With a brick?" laughed Smith.

"Oh, no, merely verbally. He is a sensible dog. I persuaded him that he had been hasty. So he withdrew, and I filled my pockets with the apples. Subsequently I found that he was following me. So I—so I named him Dobbin."

"But, Mr. Shortland," said Beryl puzzledly, "didn't you feel a little bit guilty at taking him away from his home?"

Shortland regarded her mildly as he shook



his head. "No, I think not. I used no persuasion, Miss Vernon. He came of his own free will. I have an idea that he had been finding existence dull and was glad of a change. He is rather an oldish dog, and, while my recollection of the village where I met him is hazy, I seem to recall that it was rather a dead spot for even a dog. I have a deal of sympathy for people—or dogs either—who tire of their environment. I do myself."

"And yet," reminded Mrs. Vernon, "you were looking for a place to settle down in the other day, Mr. Shortland."

"Yes, but I have been looking for that for a long time. I've always thought that if I could find the place I have in mind, I'd like it so well that I'd be content to stay in it. But—I don't know."

"Even if one doesn't stay in it long at a time," said Mrs. Vernon, "it is nice to have a home of one's own."

"You speak as feelingly, Mama, as though you had never had such a thing until to-day," said Beryl amusedly.

“Well, I was thinking of some women I know, dear, who spend all their lives bobbing around from one place to another, living in hotels and apartments, with no real home to go to when they get tired of it.”

“And you think that when Mr. Shortland gets tired of ‘bobbing around’ he ought to have a home to go to? I wonder, though, who would feed the pigeons while he was away.”

“The pigeons?” asked Shortland.

“She’s referring to the dove-cot,” explained her mother. “If it is not an impertinent question, Mr. Shortland, won’t you *please* tell me why you want a dove-cot?”

“A dove-cot? I don’t, or, rather, *I* don’t demand it; the vision does. You see, Mrs. Vernon, I have been, more or less unconsciously, constructing this place I seek for many years. Just how the dove-cot got there, I don’t know; but it is there, right in the middle of the garden. I have only to shut my eyes to see the whole place vividly; and almost every time I see it I find that I have added something new. For instance, just the other day I discovered that at the right of the door-

way there is a queer, wrought-iron shoe-scraper with the points ending in a swirl."

"But that is like the one at our door," said Beryl.

"Then that explains where I got it. And it seems to show, too, that in building this dream house of mine I have borrowed bits here, there, and everywhere. And I fancied that it was original! I wonder," he added puzzledly, "where I got that dove-cot!"

"One sees them in England," Beryl suggested.

"In England? To be sure! I remember now. It was a little place in Dorset. Something-minster—Ilminster, was it? You come around a sudden bend in the road between high hedges, and in front of you, away off, is the sea, intensely blue, and on the right is a warm red cottage set in a tangle of briar-roses that climb and nod to you over the fence. And beyond the house is the dove-cot, with a thatched roof and gray and white doves fluttering about it. And the air is filled with the mingled fragrance of drying seaweed and pink and white and yellow roses. Yes, yes, in Dor-



set it was. And so that is where I got my dove-cot! I remember now."

"Dorset must be very lovely if it is as you describe it," said Mrs. Vernon. "I don't think I have ever been in Dorset."

"The world is very full of lovely places," responded Shortland thoughtfully. "This is one of them, Mrs. Vernon."

"Yes, Alderbury is pretty, isn't it?" she agreed.

"A bit dull, though, yet, old man," said Mr. Smith. "You ought to come back later."

"I fancy three visits to one place in the same year would be extraordinary for Mr. Shortland," observed Beryl.

He turned and looked across at her thoughtfully for a moment in his intent way. When he removed his gaze he said slowly, "I'm not sure that I shan't stay here a while."

"Do, Mr. Shortland," said Mrs. Vernon cordially. "We will even set up a dove-cot for you. I was saying just before you appeared that if you'd come back and explain things a little, I'd do it in a minute! Do you—do you play bridge?"



There was a gurgle of amusement from Beryl, and even Mr. Smith chuckled at the overelaborate carelessness of Mrs. Vernon's tone.

"Indifferently," replied Shortland.

"That means you play very well, I'm sure. You and Mr. Smith must come over very soon and take dinner. I presume you will put up at the club?"

"I have a card to it," responded Shortland gravely. "Smith very kindly put me up." There was an explosive guffaw from Smith, and the ladies smiled demurely. "I think, however, I'd prefer, should I remain, to find lodgings."

"Aren't any," returned Smith. "It's club or nothing, old man."

Shortland viewed him indulgently. "One can always find lodgings, Smith," he said. He arose and held out his hand to Mrs. Vernon. "Thank you for admitting me to 'Solana,' Mrs. Vernon——"

"That really is its name now, Mr. Shortland," said Beryl.

He smiled across at her. "It always was,"

he replied. Then, to Mrs. Vernon again: "If I stay for a few days, you will let me come again?"

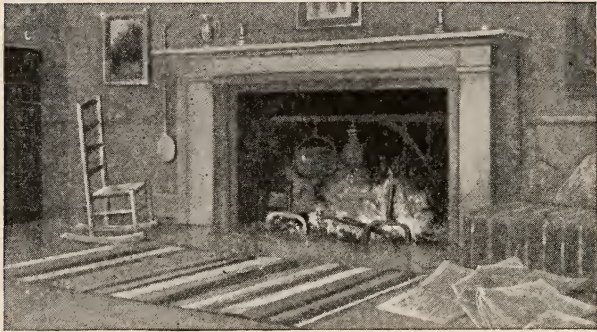
"I command you to!" laughed his hostess. "And if you have a spark of pity in you, Mr. Shortland, you will stay and help to cheer up two lonesome females."

"If I stay," he responded gravely, "it will be only because I am pampering my greatest failing."

"And what," asked Beryl as she gave him her hand, "is your greatest failing, Mr. Shortland?"

"Selfishness, Miss Vernon," he replied.





VI

THE peculiar thing about Alderbury is that if you travel by motor along the highway, you pass through it without knowing. It is not on the main-travelled road, but on what the blue book refers to as an "alternate route," a fact upon which the citizens of Alderbury congratulate themselves every day of their lives. Says the blue book:

- 41.1 2.0 PITTER'S BRIDGE (no town); turn sharp left across bridge and RR., immediately turning right and follow main road through
- 42.3 1.2 ALDERBURY. At fork in front of small white church keep left, passing golf-course on left, bearing right down-grade into——

But you're away beyond Alderbury by now, and, unless you've been reading the book, you never knew it! You see, it is one of those New England villages which begin nowhere in particular and end the same way. A half-dozen houses are set down at long intervals along the main road, and there's the "small white church," too, and a low-browed building that holds the general store and the post-office in front, a blacksmith's shop at the back, and a meeting-hall upstairs. But things are so far apart that it would never occur to you that you were passing through a town. You might, were you not too busy holding on your hat or watching the speedometer, catch a glimpse over a hedge of a modest white-painted house set amidst trees and flowers and perhaps exclaim, "How charming!" And later, as you swept past the boundary of the golf-course, you'd very likely see the club-house peering from its grove of maples on a far knoll and say, "Why, there's a perfectly good club-house over there! Now, who do you suppose ever uses it?"

If, however, instead of tearing along



through the elm-shaded street, you will slow down and, as the blue book would say, "turn sharp left at stone watering trough" and follow the street that leads slightly up-hill, you will make the discovery that there is more to Alderbury than meets the goggled eyes of the hurrying motorist. For back of the main road are more than a dozen pleasant summer residences, some genuinely old, some, recently built, looking more ancient than the genuine. There are no very large estates in Alderbury. An acre or two satisfies the most ambitious taste; for with sixty acres of rolling field and forest at the back door in which you have a proprietary right, what is the use of a large holding? In Alderbury when folks want to stretch their legs they cross the road or pass through a rear gate and there is the golf-course at their service.

The club-house is small, clap-boarded, green-shuttered. It was a farm-house for some seventy years before the club bought it and put a wide veranda all around it and smartened it up. There are sleeping-rooms upstairs—small, dormer-windowed compart-



ments that look out into the maple branches—and a big living-room downstairs that takes up all one end of the building. Then, there's a blue-and-white dining-room and a yellow-and-gray ladies' room and a brown-and-buff tap-room and a kitchen and all the other features necessary. Very wisely, in smartening it up, they left as much of the old appearance as possible, and have even added to it wherever and whenever antiquity is compatible with comfort. Thus, the living-room fireplace is broad enough to shed its genial warmth into a dozen faces, and yet, with its old-fashioned crane and its big wrought-iron fire-dogs and its stingy little shelf above, it still preserves Colonial traditions.

Around the fireplace on a rainy morning, a few days later, a half-dozen men were seated. As it was but ten o'clock, the feminine element was still lacking. There is an unwritten law to the effect that until ten-thirty or eleven the club-house shall be sacred to the men, a number of whom dwell there up under the eaves. There was a good deal of tobacco-smoke in the air, and the hearth and floor were littered with

yesterday evening's papers. (At Alderbury one didn't read the morning paper until nearly noon; and one didn't care!) Major Prescott, chairman of the Tournament Committee, was posting a handicap list on the notice-board with the aid of thumb-tacks and mild profanity. The Major had taken on Jerry Forbes for this morning, and was much disgusted with the weather conditions. Jerry, a tall, broad-shouldered youth recently out of college, was less troubled. The Major's golf was a bit finicky, and secretly Jerry was blessing the driving rain-storm. The Major resumed his chair in front of the blazing hickory logs and glanced at his right-hand neighbor.

"Rotten weather, Shortland, for your introduction to the settlement."

"I don't mind it, Major. I tramped twenty miles one day last week in just such weather."

"The devil you did! What for?"

"I don't know." Allan tapped the ashes from his pipe, reached for a pouch which lay on the arm of a nearby chair, and refilled his bowl, tamping down the tobacco with a long brown finger.

“Good Lord, Major! don’t you know better than to ask ‘China’ why he does anything?” inquired Tom Frazer. “The chap’s a law unto himself.”

“Don’t see, though,” grumbled the Major, “why any one would want to tramp around country on a day like this. Who invented the New England climate, any way?”

“Don’t glare at me,” said Tom. “I didn’t.”

“Fine thing for the farmers,” observed Burton Bryant. “We needed rain badly. Roads were getting fierce, too.”

“I don’t see,” suggested young Russell, who was smoking a pipe and parching his tongue because the Major made such a fuss about cigarettes—“I don’t see why you couldn’t cover in the fair green with water-proof cloth or something, the way they do with the tobacco-fields.”

“Wish you could,” said Tom Frazer. “It would keep my drives down. Let’s put it up to the committee.”

“May I ask,” inquired Allan Shortland, “whose tobacco I am smoking?”



“Mine,” replied Jerry Forbes. “Like it?”

“No.” Allan knocked his pipe against his shoe. “Baccy, please.”

Four pouches were laughingly proffered, and Allan gravely accepted them all. “There’s a popular impression,” he said, “that Italian tobacco is no good. I bought some in Florence once, though, that was remarkable. I’ve always meant to go back there for more. It’s a little shop in the *via*—what’s that street that runs along the hill there where they’re always plowing with the white oxen, Smith?”

“Blessed if know, old man! The only time I was in Florence we motored, and——”

“Consequently saw nothing,” concluded Allan, returning the pouches and brushing tobacco from his clothes. “There’s only one way to do Italy or any other country: walk.”

“That’s all well enough for you, you lucky beggar,” said the Major; “but what are you going to do when you’ve got your women-folks along? Can’t see them puddling through twenty miles of rain, can you?”

“It’s a mistake to have them with you,”

replied Allan calmly. "Send them ahead by train—or—motor, if you like—and meet them now and then."

The three married men present set up a howl of derision.

"You get married, Shortland, and try it," said Bryant.

"I'm thinking of it."

"What!" It was a chorus. "Getting married?"

"Yes." Allan observed the fire thoughtfully. "Anything very startling in the idea?"

"Rather!" exclaimed George Smith. "Can't seem to see you married, old man." Smith half closed his eyes, as though making the effort.

"Of course she's a Chinese lady?" suggested the Major, with a wink for the others.

"No, American. At least, I suppose so."

"You suppose so!" laughed Frazer. "Don't you know?"

"Why, yes; when I stop to consider the matter, I know that she is. Her nationality never occurred to me, that's all. Yes, she's American. Must be."

“Did you meet abroad, ‘China’?” asked Bryant.

“Er—yes, on the other side.”

“I say, fellows, he doesn’t seem real certain of that!” chuckled Smith. “When’s it going to be, old man?”

“I don’t know. Not for awhile, I suppose.”

“Do we—er—know the fortunate lady?” asked the Major.

“Possibly. You won’t mind if I don’t tell you any more just now? The fact is——” Allan’s voice tapered away into silence. After a moment, “I believe announcements usually come from the lady,” he added. “That is correct, Major? I appeal to you because you have had some experience, I think.”

The Major joined in the laugh. The present Mrs. Prescott was the third.



VII

“I SAY,” suggested Smith presently, “we can’t get outdoors this morning. What about a game of bridge, Major?”

The Major glanced disgustedly at the rain and grunted acquiescence.

“Shortland, how about you?”

“Thanks, no. I never play bridge in the morning. It upsets me.”

Bryant and young Russell, however, were willing to play, and the quartet moved away to the end of the room. Jerry Forbes turned to Allan.

“Where are you hanging out, Shortland?” he asked. “I wish I’d known you were here.

I could have put you up for as long as you liked. Perhaps it isn't too late? You're not rooming here, are you?"

"Thanks, that's very good of you, but I have a room with a Mrs. Whipple near the post-office. It's a very comfortable place."

"Mrs. Whipple!" exclaimed Jerry. "Why, I never knew she took lodgers!"

"She told me she never had before," replied Allan. "In fact, she didn't seem to want to take me at first. And then Dobbin rather complicated it."

"Who's Dobbin? A horse?"

"Dog. Mrs. Whipple keeps a cat, and she was afraid Dobbin would chase it or something. I don't see why he should. It's a very ugly cat."

"So she took you in, eh? Why, Mrs. Whipple is the toniest old dame in the settlement, Shortland! Mayflower descendant and all that sort of thing. Her grandfather or some one chased the Indians out of Alderbury, I believe." Jerry observed the other wonderingly. "How the dickens did you do it?"

"Do what?"

“Why, persuade her to let a room to you! She never would before.”

“Oh, I don't know,” replied Allan vaguely. “I told her, for one thing, that if she didn't take me in, I'd have to live over here; and I said you chaps played poker and bridge and drank too many high-balls, and that it was no place for me. So she gave me a very nice corner room, with breakfasts, and Dobbin has a stall in the stable. It's quite comfortable.”

“That's a fine way to get at her!” said Jerry, with a grin. “By the way, have you taken out a membership?”

“No; I have a two-weeks' card.”

“Oh, I rather fancied from something he said that you'd decided to spend some time with us. If you are going to do that, you know, a season membership will cost you only fifty, and I'd be awfully glad to propose you.”

“Thanks, but I hardly know yet how long I shall stay. It altogether depends on the dove-cot.”

“On—the *what?*”

“The dove-cot. Now, don't tell me,” he



added severely, "that you don't know what a dove-cot is!"

"I know what it is all right, but I'm blest if I know what it's got to do with your staying in Alderbury!"

"I've taken them up as a hobby. Every one should have a hobby, Forbes. It—er—keeps you young, they say. Ever hear of Andrew Carnegie?"

"The name sounds familiar," replied the other.

"His hobby is to present libraries. Mine is to present dove-cots. Carnegie, though, makes a town dig down and pay for part of the library itself. I don't do that. I present dove-cots outright. Which shows that as a philanthropist I am 'way ahead of him. Just now I am engaged in erecting a dove-cot for Mrs. Vernon."

"But—but what the deuce are they for?" asked Jerry, uncertain whether to take the matter seriously.

"Dove-cots?" Allan gravely considered the question for a moment. Finally, "Dove-cots," he replied, "belong in the category of



garden accessories. No garden should be without one. Got one, by the way?"

Jerry shook his head.

"I suppose," he ventured with a grin, "you don't carry them around with you?"

"Oh, no. By the way, that reminds me. I suppose you have a carpenter here?"

"Yes, there's an old chap named Haley, who lives in the first house beyond the store toward The Falls. I don't believe, though, he'd be capable of making a dove-cot, if that's what you're thinking of."

"Oh, they're not difficult. The hardest part is the thatching. I'd have to do that myself. You bundle the straw together so—and bring it down over the roof——"

"Shortland, you're an awful ass," laughed Jerry. "For a while I really believed in your confounded dove-cots! Feel like some golf? It isn't raining much now."

It stopped raining entirely after luncheon, and by three o'clock the sun came out. And with it came the ladies, and the club-house put on a gayer aspect. Mrs. Vernon and Beryl drove over about four. Driving or motoring



to the club was rather frowned on, but Mrs. Vernon's position was sufficiently secure to allow an occasional lapse. George Smith, having just holed-out at the ninth, hurried over to help the ladies from the landaulet, only to find the privilege disputed by Jerry Forbes. On the porch Jerry said appealingly:

"Can't we have that game you promised me, Miss Vernon?"

"Are you sure there was a promise, Mr. Forbes?" asked Beryl, her glance travelling up and down the porch, and her head nodding in answer to salutations.

"Well—almost, any way. Won't you make it a real promise and—and 'do it now'?"

"Do I look, Mr. Forbes, as though I were dressed for golf?" asked Beryl smilingly.

Jerry viewed her costume dubiously.

"Couldn't you—er—pin it up or something?" he asked.

"I'm afraid not. Besides, I'm a very poor player, Mr. Forbes. You wouldn't enjoy playing with me a bit. Still, some day, if you like—— What have you done with Mr. Shortland, Mr. Smith?"

“Lost him,” answered Smith. “He disappeared after luncheon; said he was going to take that dog of his for a walk.”

“That awful dog!” exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, with a smile.

“He had him over here yesterday,” chuckled Smith, “and tied him to a chair. Half-way to the first tee he caught up with us, chair and all. After that he followed us around, and I stepped on him fifty times. Made me so nervous I couldn’t do a thing, give you my word. He beat me hands-down.”

“The dog?” asked Jerry facetiously.

“Rather! You try it some time and see what you can do with a fool dog under your feet every shot!”

“Shortland was telling me this morning about the dove-cot, Mrs. Vernon,” said Jerry. “Rather a clever idea, I think.”

“The—the dove-cot?” faltered Mrs. Vernon.

“Yes, the one he’s going to put up in your garden,” replied Jerry cheerfully. “Unless it’s all a silly joke?” he added dubiously and inquiringly.



“Don’t ask me!” sighed Mrs. Vernon. “If Mr. Shortland says he is going to put a dove-cot in my garden, I suppose I’m going to have a dove-cot in my garden! He—he’s the most determined man I ever saw!”

“He’s a wonder!” said Jerry. “He taught us a new card game last night—Pie-Face, or something like that, he called it. Said it was a Chinese game two thousand years old, but I’ll bet a hat he made it up himself, because he kept springing new rules all the time.”

“Won seven dollars from me,” chuckled Smith. “It—it was a fine game—for him!”

“You deserved to lose,” laughed Beryl. “I have a feeling that if one followed Mr. Shortland’s directions long enough, one would find oneself in jail—or an asylum! We have quite a crowd here to-day, Mr. Forbes.”

“Yes, in another week or two we’ll have the whole gang back, I guess. The Winthrops came yesterday, you know. And the Packers will be here the twenty-seventh. I had a line from Bob this morning. I say, how about the mixed handicap, Miss Vernon? I wish you’d play with me.”

“Thanks, but I’m not sure that I’ll play at all. Really, Mr. Forbes, you must believe me when I tell you that I’m an awful duffer at golf. I neither play very often nor very well.”

“Oh, we’d get by all right, Miss Vernon. It’s two weeks from Friday. I’ll put our names down, and then if you want to back out, it won’t matter a bit. I mean—well, it will to me, you know, but——”

“That is what I call a brilliant recovery,” laughed Beryl. “No, don’t count on me yet, Mr. Forbes. I’ll let you know later. Mama, shall we drive over and call on the Winthrops?”

“I suppose we’d better. Don’t forget this evening, Mr. Smith. We dine at seven. Mr. Forbes, would you mind calling my carriage?”



VIII

“I’VE been thinking,” announced Allan, when he turned up at the club, shortly after six, “that it would be an excellent idea to take that Russell boy along with us.”

“My dear fellow,” demurred Smith, tying his scarf in front of the diminutive mirror in his small chamber, “he’s not invited!”

“I’ll invite him myself,” replied the other untroubledly. “After all, you know, four is an awkward number at a dinner-table.”

“But Mrs. Vernon might not like it,” said Smith earnestly. “I really wouldn’t, old man.”

“Not like it? Of course she will! She’ll be

awfully pleased. Why not? The boy's all right, isn't he?"

"All right, yes, but don't you see? Why, hang it, Shortland, she is only preparing for four at dinner!"

"Oh, you mean there mightn't be enough to go around? Well, one can always open a tin of something. 'Add hot water and serve,' you know. Some one told me that you can get very delicious spaghetti in tins nowadays, all cooked and messed up with tomato and cheese. Rather wonderful, isn't it, the things you can get ready-cooked these days? Quite makes a fellow want to go to housekeeping. I'll step down and find him."

"I don't know what she will think, Shortland," protested Smith. "I—I really don't think you'd better!"

"Nonsense! He's a very nice boy. And there's always the spaghetti. I'm terribly fond of spaghetti."

"Well, for Heaven's sake, telephone over and ask her, old man!"

"Yes, I might do that."

"Although," added Smith plaintively, "I



don't see why the deuce you want to lug that chap along."

"To split up the awful geometrical precision of a *partie carrée*, of course. Besides, the boy looks lonesome. It's really a charitable act, Smith."

Allan found Harry Russell smoking over a month-old copy of the London *Graphic* in front of the empty fireplace. He was a nice-looking boy of twenty-one or -two, whose folks lived in one of the houses across the links and were at present in Europe. He seemed surprised when Allan issued his invitation.

"Are you quite sure, Mr. Shortland, she wanted me?" he asked. "I—I've never called there, you see. I think they're dandy folks, of course, and all that, but I—I don't know them very well——"

"That's just it, Russell; you should. You needn't dress. Come just as you are, if you like." (The boy was in knickerbockers and golf stockings.) "It's just a quiet little dinner, with bridge afterwards. Mrs. Vernon and her daughter will be extremely upset if you fail them."

“Why—why, if you’re quite sure it’s all right,” stammered the boy. “I’d like to awfully. But I must get out of these things. It won’t take me ten minutes, Mr. Shortland.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of time, Russell. I’ll just let Mrs. Vernon know you can come.” He went across to the telephone-booth. “Hello! Kindly give me Mrs. Vernon’s residence. . . . What say? . . . Oh, is it really? That’s very nice. Would you mind calling it? . . . Hello! May I speak with Mrs. Vernon? . . . Oh, no, don’t do that! Merely tell her, please, that Mr. Shortland called her up to say that he is bringing Mr. Russell to dinner this evening. . . . Yes, Mr. Russell; R,u,s— . . . Thank you.”

“What did she say?” asked Smith, as Allan again took possession of the single comfortable chair in the room.

“Oh, it was all right. She said she’d let her know.”

“Let who know?” demanded Smith, one brush suspended perplexedly above his thinning locks.

“Mrs. Vernon, of course.”

“Mrs. Vernon, yes; but who is she going to let know?”

“Why, Mrs. Vernon.”

“Mrs. Vernon is going to let Mrs. Vernon know——”

“I had the maid on the 'phone, Smith. I asked her to tell Mrs. Vernon that I was bringing Mr. Russell. She said she would. I have never seen her, but from her voice I judged her to be truthful. One can tell a great deal from voices, Smith. Rather odd, isn't it, that no one has ever thought to make a study of that? I dare say that with practice one could read character very nicely from the voice. Possibly one might go a bit further and discern the future. There's a possibility for you! 'Your fortune by telephone! Voice-Reading by Europe's Premier Exponent of the New Science! Chiromancy, Necromancy, Astrology, Cartomancy, Phrenology Outdone! Your Fate in Your Voice! Call Bryant, 29000; make your appointment with the World Renowned Phonologist, Prof. George Smith!' ”

“Back up, old man! Where do I get my money?”

“H’m; that’s so. You might—that’s the idea!—arrange with the telephone company to charge the fee on the fellow’s bill. Then you collect monthly from the company. If I were you, Smith, I’d look into it. I’ve no doubt you could work up a paying business. And it wouldn’t be at all arduous. You could lie on a couch with a telephone strapped to your head and simply coin money! I think it’s rather decent of me to put you on to such a big thing. Are you almost ready? If dinner is at seven, we ought to try to get there not later than half-past.”





IX

As a matter of fact, it lacked some ten minutes of the time set for dinner when the three men were conducted into the library. Young Russell appeared somewhat ill at ease during the few moments before Mrs. Vernon's appearance. But her welcome reassured him.

"It was so nice of you to come, Mr. Russell," she declared. "I was afraid that you might not be able to."

"It's corking of you to—to ask me," stammered the boy gratefully. Mrs. Vernon smiled sweetly and turned to Allan.

"Have you ever met my husband, Mr. Shortland?" she asked.

“No, Mrs. Vernon, but I have seen him on several occasions. It must be very unpleasant to be kept in Washington in such weather.”

“Yes, the place is unbearable in summer, I think. There’s a portrait of the Senator in the living-room you must see. I want your opinion of it. Mr. Smith, I believe, told us that you had studied art, Mr. Shortland.”

“Very little, Mrs. Vernon. I am still a critic.” He followed her across the hall, and she led the way to the portrait. “Paxton, eh? Yes, I like it immensely, Mrs. Vernon. He had a difficult subject, too, for a painter once told me that it is far harder to do a portrait of a good-looking person than a homely one, since you can make the homely one good-looking, but you can’t——”

“Bother the portrait, Mr. Shortland! I didn’t bring you in here to look at that!”

“Well, I wanted to believe the alternative, but didn’t dare to,” replied Allan gravely. “In fact, Mrs. Vernon, I scarcely thought you had discovered my secret as yet.”

Mrs. Vernon laughed. “It’s no use,” she said. “Now, Mr. Shortland, *why?*”

"Why?" He gazed thoughtfully at the painting. "Well, he looked so lonely there all by himself, Mrs. Vernon. And I knew you wouldn't mind my bringing him. Smith thought I oughtn't to, but I said I was sure you could open a tin of something. Is it spaghetti, Mrs. Vernon? They say the canned spaghetti is quite delicious."

"You absurd man! Of course I don't mind, only——" She studied him suspiciously. "Well, I know that isn't the reason. I suppose, though, I'll find out in time. Shall we go back? I think Beryl is down. I'm glad you like it. Mr. Vernon thinks it makes him look too—what was it your father said about the portrait, Beryl?"

"That it made him look too senatorial," replied Beryl, as she shook hands with Allan. "Father has a rabid dislike for what he calls 'frockcoat statesmanship,' Mr. Shortland."

"There was very little of that in view the last time I visited the Senate gallery," responded Allan. "They were most of them in their shirt-sleeves, waving palm-leaf fans. It was an impressive sight."



“That must have been the summer before last,” said Mrs. Vernon. “That hot spell was frightful, wasn’t it? I remember that it burned the links quite brown. I think dinner is ready.”

Perhaps there was something in Allan’s theory that five is a more comfortable number at table than four. At all events, dinner went very merrily. Smith was less tiresome than usual, Harry Russell was engagingly modest and attentive, and Allan, who was evidently in the best of spirits, incited the others to a reckless disregard of sense and reason. Smith chuckingly told of Allan’s science of voice-reading, and the exponent of the new art was called on for a demonstration and responded readily. Mrs. Vernon was required to recite the opening lines of Gray’s *Elegy*, which Allan gravely declared was especially suitable for his purpose, and then he told a number of astonishing things about the lady’s past and predicted a widely sensational future, so opposed to the probabilities as to be startling in the extreme. For Beryl he discovered a future more conventional.

“I see,” he murmured with half-closed eyes, “a man, handsome, talented, indescribably fascinating. I see—yes, a church and a great crowd about it. I hear music. Within the church are many people, and I see—— Can it be? But yes!—a clergyman. He is speaking. Before him, kneeling, I see you and—a man! The man’s face is hidden, and yet——” He paused in doubt. “Kindly recite the second line again, Miss Vernon.”

“‘The lowing herd winds slowly o’er the lea,’ ” recited Beryl gravely.

“Thank you. Yes, I was not mistaken. It is indeed our hero. I think—I think it is a wedding I see!”

“Wonderful!” chuckled Smith.

“Again the scene changes. I see a house, a white house with green blinds. It stands just back from a pleasant road and peers with friendly eyes——”

“*Do* you see the dove-cot?” asked Beryl.

“I do. Beneath it I see you seated with the same man——”

“Don’t be stingy, Shortland!” interrupted Smith.

“You are happy. At your knee——”

“Mr. Shortland!”

“I see a dog. You stroke his head. He is an old dog, but kind and faithful. The garden is filled with the fragrance of flowers, the song of birds, and the drone of bees. The twilight sky pales, and presently, rousing from a sweet reverie, you look lovingly into the handsome face of your companion and I hear you say—but no, I must not tell that.”

“Oh, Mr. Shortland! Just when it was getting interesting! Do go on! What do I say?”

“You say, ‘It is getting chilly, dear, and you mustn’t forget your rheumatism. Come, Allan!’ ”

“Handsome and fascinating!” jeered Smith, above the laughter. “What do you know about that for conceit? I say, Shortland, I’ll give you a fiver if you’ll listen again and hear her say ‘George’!”

“I cannot tell a lie,” replied the fortune-teller. “The word was ‘Allan’.”

“It’s a perfectly fascinating picture,” declared Beryl. “So idyllic and Belascoesque.”

“Not very exciting, though,” Smith grumbled. “I like Mrs. Vernon’s fortune better. There was something doing every minute there.”

When the party returned to the library they found the bridge table already set. There was real heroism back of Mrs. Vernon’s smiling announcement.

“Now, you four are to sit down and play, and I’ll look on for awhile,” she said.

“Nonsense, Mama,” protested Beryl, “you know I don’t care for bridge, and——”

“Let me stay out, Mrs. Vernon,” put in Russell earnestly. “I——”

“No, do as I say, every one of you. Perhaps I’ll cut in later——”

“Mrs. Vernon, will you forgive me for upsetting your plan?” asked Allan gently. “I am suffering severely from bridge-player’s cramp, and you will really have to let me off.”

“The idea!” scoffed Mrs. Vernon.

“I insist, really. Just let me sit beside you and imbibe bridge-wisdom. There! Now we’re all happy. Shall I score? Perhaps I’d better not. I always forget about the honors.”

Beryl and Smith had just won the first rubber when through the open windows came the sound of footsteps on the path, and, a moment later, the distant tinkle of a bell. Mrs. Vernon frowned.

“Who do you suppose that is?” she murmured. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Russell; you bridged, didn’t you? We’ll play it without. Has any one gone to the door, Mr. Shortland?”

“I think so. I hear voices, Mrs. Vernon. You won’t let him break up our happy little evening, will you?”

“Is it a him?” asked Mrs. Vernon, laying down her hand and turning toward the door. “I wonder——”

“Mr. Forbes, ma’am,” announced the maid.

“How delightful!” exclaimed Mrs. Vernon, with a sigh. “Ask him to come in here, Jennie.”

“Good-evening, Mrs. Vernon. Good-evening, Miss Vernon. Hello, everybody else!” Jerry shook hands and then surveyed the scene puzzledly and turned an inquiring look on Allan. “Shortland, you’re an awful liar,

I'm afraid. Mrs. Vernon, I think he's put up a job on me. He telephoned me about six that I was wanted over here after dinner to make a fourth at bridge."

Mrs. Vernon cast an accusing glance at Allan, but only replied, "You're very welcome, Mr. Forbes, and you really are wanted. You see Mr. Shortland refuses to play, and I am just filling in——"

"No, no, you take my place, Jerry!" protested Russell. "I'd lots rather look on."

"Where have I heard that before?" laughed Jerry. "Every one sit tight, please, and just——"

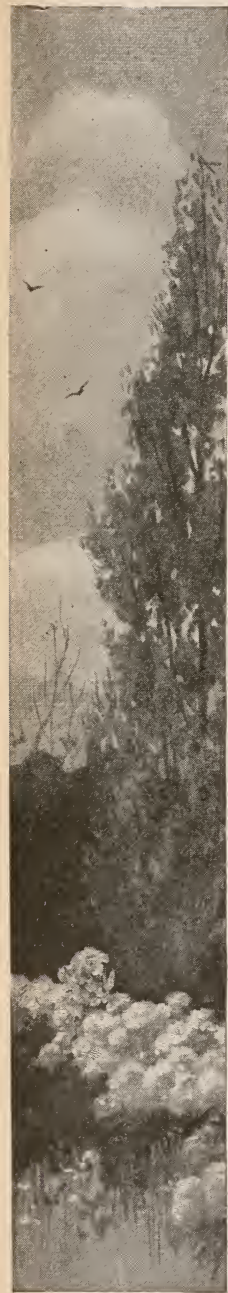
"You play with Smith," said Allan calmly. "Miss Vernon is not feeling well, and I'm going to take her on to the porch."

"Not feeling well!" exclaimed Mrs. Vernon. "Why, Beryl dear, what——"

"You'll have to ask Mr. Shortland, Mama," replied Beryl amusedly. "Where do I feel ill, Mr. Shortland?"

"Your head aches," replied Allan sympathetically. "The fresh air——"

"Of all treacherous——" began Smith.



“Shall I get you a wrap?” asked Allan solicitously. Beryl smiled, shook her head, hesitated, and finally held out her cards to Jerry.

“Do you mind, Mr. Forbes?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” he answered stoutly. “I strongly object to that—that conspirator’s high-handed methods, Miss Vernon. Look here, Shortland, you let Miss Vernon alone. She hasn’t any headache; have you, Miss Vernon?”

“I—I think I have—just a little,” answered Beryl demurely. “Perhaps I shall be better for the air. We’ve already won one rubber, Mr. Forbes. Wish you luck!”

“You wait till I get you at the club tomorrow,” grumbled Jerry, viewing Allan malevolently. “I’ll—I’ll——”

“No trumps, Jerry,” said Smith. “Russell bridged. They took the first. You play, Russell. The lead’s across the board.”



X

It was comfortably cool on the porch. From the library door a broad path of yellow light crossed the reed mat, worked strange effects with the thick foliage of a hydrangea in a tub, and stepped down into the garden from whence came spring sounds and fragrance. Treetoads were gossiping out there, and early blossoms nodded their heads in the dim radiance of a young moon already setting behind the feathery tops of the elms, and yielded spicy perfume to the sigh of a southerly breeze. Beryl stretched herself in the long wicker chair, and Allan seated himself nearby with a deep sigh of satisfaction.

“Houses,” he said, “should be used only to sleep in. May I smoke a pipe, Miss Vernon?”

“Certainly. Is that why I have a headache?”

“Oh, no. I wanted to talk to you. Do you—mind very much?”

“I’m flattered. Do you always have your way, may I ask?”

“Only when it is good for me.”

“And who is the judge of that? Mr. Shortland?”

“Oh, no; Providence, I think. Do you believe in it, Miss Vernon?”

“In Providence? Why, I suppose so. That is, of course. Don’t you, Mr. Shortland?”

“Yes, and never so much as now. Surely nothing but Providence brought me to your gate the other day.”

“Oh! And—just what do you mean by that, Mr. Shortland?”

“That I have wanted to find you a long time, Miss Vernon.”

“To find me? But I thought it was the house with the friendly windows you sought.”



“And perhaps a face at a window.”

“Mine, Mr. Shortland?” She laughed softly. “How very flattering!”

“You laugh at that? Then, you forget what I told you the other day: that we have met before?”

“Do you mean it? Are you serious?” she asked curiously. “I’m ashamed to say that I don’t recall it. That isn’t very complimentary, is it? But I’m afraid it’s true.”

“Oh, you had no chance to remember. The meeting was—well, one-sided.”

“How interesting! When and where was it, Mr. Shortland?”

“Let me do a picture for you. A night—why, like this, with just such a moon, to be seen now and then at the end of some dim canyon of dark walls. Instead of this fragrance of flowers and dewy earth, the bouquet of Venice, that half-stale smell of water that mingles with a thousand other odors from open doorways or windows.”

“Venice!” she murmured.

“Venice, and the Rio della Madonnetta. The darkness is flecked here and there with

the red gleam from a gondola, and in the darker shadows of the shuttered house-walls stars are twinkling far down in the green water. Sometimes an open doorway sends a path of yellow light across the darkness. Faintly sounds the tinkle of distant music, and the lipping splash of the dipping oar keeps time to it. In a gondola are three persons, a man, a woman, and a girl. Ahead of them the red light of their lantern swims along the water-road. For a moment the purple sky, silver-washed by the sinking moon, is shut from sight by the deep black shadow of a bridge. Then again the cool green gloom of the open canal and the blank mystery of the houses with their shuttered windows and the lapping of the water against the walls. '*Premié!*' cries the *poppe* as the gondola swings around a corner. '*Sta-i-i!*' And then, '*Sciar! Sciar, Signori!*' for another gondola has slipped from the deeper shadows of the smaller canal, and the two come together——"

"And that was you!" she exclaimed wonderingly.

"I who reached out instinctively as the

boats jostled and who, by what we call chance, closed my hand upon your hand for a moment in the darkness. It was all over in an instant. The boats floated apart, the *poppes* consigning each other to perdition courteously and musically, but in that instant the light from a lantern fell across your face. Then our hands parted and our gondolas slipped away into the green shadows. And not until then did I find the ring."

"The ring?" she asked.

"You didn't know? See." He drew something from his pocket and held it toward her. She took it and leaned forward into the light.

"My ring!" she marvelled. "But how——"

"It must have been very loose on your finger," he replied, "for when my hand came away from yours it drew the ring with it. I assure you the theft was not intentional. When I discovered it there, clenched in my palm, I bade the *poppe* turn back and seek you. We followed many lights, but didn't find yours. And then, the next day, I advertised. Had you seen the paper——"

"We left Venice the next day. That was



"THEN OUR HANDS PARTED AND OUR GONDOLAS SLIPPED AWAY INTO THE GREEN SHADOWS"



our last evening there. And I never even suspected that I had lost the ring in that way! It was always loose and always falling off, and I thought I had just dropped it somewhere without knowing. And to think of finding it again in this way! And after—why, that must have been four years ago, Mr. Shortland!”

“Yes, four years ago, Miss Vernon.” He held out his hand.

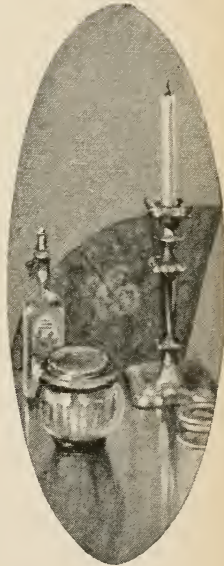
“The ring?” she asked, and dropped it into his hand again. He returned it to his pocket.

“Oh!” she said in surprise. “Then, I’m not to have it, after all?”

“If you demand it,” he replied. “I had hoped, since it is not intrinsically very valuable, you would allow me to keep it as a reward for returning it, Miss Vernon. Besides, it was a queer little adventure in its way, and I should like something to—well, something as a souvenir. The ring answers excellently.”

“But—but it is really mine, Mr. Shortland,” she protested.

“And you value it very highly for reasons of association?” he asked.



“N-no, not very. It was one a friend gave me at school. It is only a little turquoise.”

“That is all. And I am very fond of turquoise; and very fond of this ring. Thank you.”

“But I haven’t given it to you yet,” she laughed.

“Then, don’t, Miss Vernon. Merely allow me to keep it.”

“If you wish to,” she answered indifferently. After a moment she added, “And you recognized me the other day at once, Mr. Shortland? You must have a remarkable memory.”

“If I said the obvious thing, you’d accuse me again of flattery. So I won’t. Have you been in Venice since?”

“No, that was the first and only time. You have, though, I suppose.”

“Yes, and haunted the canals; but—I never found you.”

“Did you go back just to find—the owner of the ring?” she asked.

“Just to find the owner,” he replied gravely.

“And now, having found her, you refuse to give it up!”

“Yes.”

“Suppose I demand it?”

“Then, I'd return it.”

“Oh!” She shrugged. “You disarm me.” After a moment, “I wish,” she continued, “you'd tell me something, Mr. Shortland.”

“Willingly. It is——?”

“Where you fell from.”

“There's no mystery about it, Miss Vernon. I left New York a fortnight or so ago, journeyed to Boston with a friend in his car, spent a day there renewing old acquaintances, and then started out afoot to see the world—and find the house with the dove-cot.”

“And when you have found it you will settle down and raise pigeons and never go a-roaming again?”

“I'd rather not promise all that,” he replied with a smile. “At least, I should always go back to it.”

“You travel a great deal, don't you, Mr. Shortland?”

“Yes.”



“And I suppose you’ve been to lots of places.”

“A good many, Miss Vernon.”

“You spoke the other day of Dorset. Have you—spent much time in England?”

“Not a great deal. The time I visited Dorset I was tramping. I get to London occasionally on my way somewhere else.”

“You must meet a great many people?”

“Yes, one does. Folks are easier to meet on the road than in their own yards. That’s one reason I like the road, I think. I—like people, like to meet them, all sorts of people.”

“I wonder,” said Beryl, “if you ever ran across a Mr. Leeds, Kenneth Leeds, in London. He’s a younger son of Lord Lowerby.”

“Yes, I know him quite well. I met him crossing over a year ago. Afterwards I spent a week at his father’s place in Derbyshire.”

“Oh!” Beryl was silent a moment. “I understand,” she went on, “that he is to be married.”

“Really? I didn’t know. He’s a fine fellow, and I wish him luck. Whom is he to marry?”

“I don't know the name. She is from Pittsburgh, and, I think, quite well off.”

“I'm glad to hear of his good fortune. The young lady will get a good husband, I think.”

“And possibly,” suggested Beryl, “a title.”

“Possibly. The elder son is not in good health, I believe. You know them, Miss Vernon?”

“I met Mr. Leeds in London the summer before last. Then he was over here after that for some time.” She hesitated. “Mr. Shortland, *don't* you know?” she asked.

“I think not, Miss Vernon.”

“Well, Mr. Leeds and I were—engaged. It—was broken off.”

“I never heard of it,” said Allan thoughtfully. “I'm—sorry. Or—at least——” He paused. “May I ask when it was, Miss Vernon?”

“Nearly a year ago; in August. It—was horrible. Every one talked so; the papers and—and every one. I thought perhaps you knew about it, and wondered at my asking about Mr. Leeds.”

“No, so many things go on that I don't learn of,” he answered. “You see, I am away from here a good deal. I think it must have been just afterwards that I met him going over. He seemed—I was sorry for him without knowing why, Miss Vernon. And now I know.”

“I don't think he needed much sympathy, Mr. Shortland. At all events, you see—he—has found consolation.”

Allan made no reply.

“I don't know just why I should bore you with this,” said Beryl. She laughed, apparently at herself. “Do ladies often make a confidant of you, Mr. Shortland?”

“Invariably,” he replied lightly. “Were I to tell you even a half of the secrets locked within this breast——”

“But I haven't told you any secret,” she sighed. “Every one knows it. That's the horrible part of it. It was all so—so awfully public, you see. Oh, I suppose I am silly, but—I've felt horribly disgraced ever since!”

“Yes, I'd say you were silly,” he agreed. “I can understand the notoriety being pain-

ful, but it's the price you must pay for being—well, in the world's eye. And you were not to blame because, as I presume, the papers went into hysterics. And certainly there is no question of disgrace, Miss Vernon. I wonder—I wonder if you haven't been taking it too seriously!"

"Yes, I have. I've been a perfect little selfish beast, Mr. Shortland. And I didn't know it until the other day—the day you appeared at the gate. Then Mama informed me of it. She didn't use just those words, but—she told me. *Please* tell me why I am saying all this to you, Mr. Shortland!"

"Because of the ring, Miss Vernon."

"The ring? Oh! Then, you'd better give it back to me, if it is going to have such an effect as—as this!"

"All the more reason for keeping it."

"Oh, I shan't do it again," she declared. "Come, let's go in and see who has won. My headache is heaps better!"



XI

JUNE passed into July, and the season at Alderbury was in full swing. Usually it was the Mixed Handicap Tournament on the Fourth and the dance in the evening that officially opened the season, but this year the early arrivals had already taken part in several events by that time. It was Allan Shortland who, with a fine disregard of custom, had led the way. Somehow, when Allan led, others rushed to follow, and his most fantastic schemes were acclaimed with enthusiasm. There had been, for instance, the Pageant. I write it with a capital since it went down in history so. The Pageant had

its inception in Allan's fertile brain at ten o'clock one June morning, and was presented on the lawn in front of the club-house at five o'clock that afternoon. It purported to represent episodes in the early history of Alderbury. If it really did, Alderbury in Colonial days was a remarkable and busy place. It was all the veriest nonsense, but a deal of ingenuity and taste were shown in the matter of costuming and setting, and every one, participants and audience alike—the latter small in numbers—had a merry time. There was a dinner in the club-house afterwards, and an impromptu dance by moonlight on the lawn later still, in which the actors in the Pageant appeared in costume.

The tournament was held on the Fourth. Beryl played with Allan, Jerry accepting his fate with philosophy and attaining revenge by winning the event with a partner who, if less to his taste than Beryl, played a far better game of golf. The ball in the evening was a big success in spite of the efforts of the weather to put a damper on it. A drizzle set in just in time to dim the brilliancy of the fire-



works display, but by cooling the air made dancing more popular. Alderbury was in the habit of keeping early hours, and usually no affair lasted much after midnight, but on this occasion at half-past one Allan was teaching the "Zulu Glide" to a dozen or more venturesome youngsters, and the older folks, looking on, quite forgot to go home. The "Zulu Glide"—which, according to its sponsor, was the only dance countenanced in the court circle of Zululand—was joyous but decorous, and not difficult to learn. The next day Mrs. Follen, one of the settlement's most dignified matrons, was heard to speculate whether "that Mr. Shortland was not—well, perhaps just a little too—should she say venturesome?—for Alderbury!" Encountering him later in the same day, drinking tea at Mrs. Vernon's, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that she had quite misjudged him, and that a quieter, more earnest, nicer-mannered man she had never met. Not, however, as she confided to her husband at dinner, that she agreed with some of the things he had said. For instance,

his plan of requiring all foreign missionaries to live for six months in Paris or Vienna before assuming their duties seemed most strange. He had explained that the idea was to complete the missionaries' education, but for her part she thought it would be a very dangerous venture!

Meanwhile Allan showed no disposition to leave Alderbury. He played a good deal of golf—he was a brilliant rather than a careful performer, and indulged in a good many experiments which more often than not resulted disastrously to his game; went for long rambles with Dobbin, now usually quite clean and correspondingly dejected; accepted invitations to anything from an afternoon tea to a ten-a-point auction party with apparent gratitude; and was an almost daily visitor to “Solana.”

There he was always welcome. Mrs. Vernon brightened perceptibly when he appeared, and was even known to recover apparently from one of her worst headaches at his advent. He played an excellent, if venturesome, game of bridge, and had taught her four new forms

of patience. As for Beryl, she and Allan had become very good friends. Any one could see that. George Smith saw it, for one, and gradually transferred his attentions to the elder Miss Mellen, who, he possibly assured himself, was experienced enough to be safe. Jerry Forbes, however, did not yield his place so readily, nor did Harry Russell, who, since the dinner party, had been a frequent caller and an eager cavalier. The settlement watched, waited, and speculated.

One afternoon Allan and Beryl, unaware of the interest they were creating, leisurely followed their balls toward the first hole. It was necessary for them to be leisurely since just holding out on the distant green were George Smith and the elder Miss Mellen. The latter was undergoing instruction and was now playing her eleventh stroke. Neither Allan nor Beryl had a caddie. Allan declared that to use one unless playing in a championship match was ridiculous. "To see a full-grown man striding along followed by a twelve-year-old boy dragging a bag of clubs as tall as he is," he declared, "reminds me of



"I SHALL PICK IT UP MYSELF, THANK YOU"

a man out walking with a valet to carry his cane! Mellen came puffing into the tap-room the other day, just about finished. 'Great exercise,' he said proudly. 'Eighteen holes in an hour and twenty minutes!' 'Did you carry your own bag?' I asked him. 'Great Scott, no!' 'Then,' said I, 'you didn't get any exercise. The caddie got it all!'

"I don't mind carrying my bag," said Beryl—she had refused to allow him to perform that service for her. "It's the picking it up that annoys me."

"That's even finer exercise," he laughed. "There's a thingumabob now that holds your bag up when you set it down—a sort of easel arrangement; good thing for women, I should think."

Beryl promptly dropped her bag with a clatter of clubs. As Allan stepped forward to pick it up, she waved haughtily back. "I shall pick it up myself, thank you. After the emphasis you put on '*women*,' I intend to drop it every twenty feet just to prove that we're not so helpless as you think."

Beryl was not a good player, and she over-



ran the hole twice before she finally trickled the ball in for six. Allan holed-out in three, and climbed the slope of the grassy knoll to where the second tee stood in the cool shadows of a belt of oaks and maples. Allan laid his pipe in the sand-box, dropped his ball to the clay, and sent it arching away with a mid-iron. Smith and his partner were dawdling about the second green. Across the wide stretch of the links the cottages of the summer colony peered from under their trees, and further southward a double line of big, graceful elms showed where the main road ran. From where they stood a chimney of "Solana" lay warmly red against a background of dark green branches.

"I think," said Allan, as they descended the little hill, "we'd better pass through those folks. We'll never get around if we don't."

"Mr. Smith appears quite devoted there," observed Beryl, with a smile. "I fear he is a—what is the word?—a philanderer."

"A pleasant occupation, I fancy," murmured Allan, "but dangerous."

"Not for George Smith, though. Have you

known him long? I think he spoke of having met you first in Paris."

"In Paris, was it? I'd forgotten. Perhaps ten years. But I can't say that I know him very well, Miss Vernon."

"Really? He spoke as though you and he were old and close friends."

"That was nice of him," replied Allan.

Beryl studied his face a moment doubtfully.

"Was that—sarcasm?" she asked.

"On my word, no! Do you think friendship is so plentiful that I can afford to poke fun at it?"

"No, indeed; only—Mr. Smith——"

"You don't quite approve of him?"

"It's only that he is rather—tiresome—at times."

"Possibly. Many of us are, though. I've always liked Smith. He's big-hearted."

Beryl looked as though she found the tribute surprising. But she only said, "You must be a very loyal friend, Mr. Shortland."

"I hope so. As a matter of fact, I don't think my loyalty has ever been tested. I have few friends, Miss Vernon; perhaps none."

“No friends! I'd have said you had more than any man I'd ever met. Why, every one likes you, Mr. Shortland.”

Allan smiled. “I meant I had no real—well, what some one calls ‘most-bosom-friend,’ Miss Vernon. I know dozens of men—scores, perhaps—as I know George Smith. I run across them here and there, and now and then lose them for awhile, find them again, and am always as glad to see them as they are to see me. But I don't know of a single person, male or female, black or white, red or yellow, who would care a continental if I never turned up again. There is one, though, but he's not a person; he's just Dobbin.”

“I don't like to hear you talk that way,” demurred Beryl, with a little frown. “I don't think—it doesn't seem as if it could be true.”

“It is, though,” he replied cheerfully. “You see, I've moved around too much. One doesn't make friends that way; only acquaintances. It's a case of the rolling stone, I guess, the moss being real friendship. I've always been on the go.”

“Why?” she asked.



He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he answered frankly. "It must have been born in me, although certainly my immediate ancestors were not rovers. My father and his father before him were stay-at-homes. My father lived the life of a Virginia planter, and I know that his wedding journey to England and France was his only excursion out of his own country. Aside from that, a trip to New York perhaps once in two years, a trip to White Sulphur occasionally, and a visit to Richmond or Washington, quite satisfied his wanderlust. I was intended for a lawyer. Possibly that is why I wasn't. This thing of settling things beforehand is dangerous. It's a challenge to Fate. I studied one year at the Columbia Law School, and then went to Paris and had a fling at art. After three years of it, I discovered that at best I could never be more than a mediocre painter, and there were so many others who could do real work, the sort I never could. So I burned some two dozen canvases—we had quite a ceremony, and all the Quarter attended—and went off on a tramp through Bavaria.

That, I think, started it, although I had poked around France a bit before that. Since then I have been pretty much on the hike. What else is there to do? Unfortunately—or fortunately, as you look at it—my stay-at-home progenitors managed to accumulate a good deal of money. That rather handicaps one, you see. Why sell things or paint pictures or write books unless the world needs your services or you need the money?"

"But you do write books, don't you?" she asked.

"After a fashion, for my own pleasure. If one knocks around enough, he gets full of a lot of stuff that he needs to get rid of for his own comfort. I've done three volumes of unilluminating travel, and one novel. At least, I intended it for a novel, and, that there might be no mistake about it, I stated the fact on the title-page. But the publishers and the critics unanimously agreed that it wasn't."

"What did they call it?" Beryl inquired.

"I'd really dislike to tell you," he replied gravely. "Some of the things wouldn't be fit for your ears, Miss Vernon."

She laughed. "I don't believe it was as bad as that, and I shall get a copy and read it at once."

"No." He shook his head. "You may get a copy; I'd be delighted to inflict one on you; and you may read it; but not at once. No one, I am convinced, ever read that book at once. It's a matter of small doses. That gives me an idea. If I ever try it again, I'll call it 'A Homœopathic Novel. To be Taken in Small Doses.' Thanks for the suggestion."

"But it wasn't mine," Beryl laughed. "Would you use a brassie, Mr. Shortland?"

"I'd follow my own inclination, Miss Vernon. If I felt in the least disposed toward a putter, I'd use that."

"You might, but I shall try a brassie shot. I hate brassies, too. I never could do anything with them except kick holes in the grass."

"There it is! Why insist on using an implement you don't like, that you're not in sympathy with? . . . You really didn't do badly, as it happened, but I'm sure that had you made use of the club your soul craved,

you'd have done better. It's a mistake to allow custom to make a slave of one, Miss Vernon."

Presently, when they had driven off again, "Do you still keep your place in Virginia, Mr. Shortland?" she asked.

"No, I sold it."

"O-oh! Why?"

"Because I would never have lived in it, and it was much too pleasant a place to let lie idle and neglected. A man wanted it for a home, and so I sold it to him. Don't you think it is happier with folks living in it than it would have been all empty and dark, with its curtains lowered and the mice scurrying about it?"

"But—does one usually consider the happiness of a house, Mr. Shortland?" she asked perplexedly.

"Why not? One should, I think. Don't you think houses have feelings?"

"How silly!"

"Not at all. At least, not to me. I always think of houses as sentient things. That is why I can never bear to look at a house or a

building being torn down. Think how it must hurt when the boards are ripped away and the beams torn from their places.”

She shook her head. “I don’t like to, although I know that it is only nonsense again. Houses have—have personality, Mr. Shortland, but not feeling.”

“I hope you are right,” he responded gravely. “Shall we play back from here? I fear there isn’t time for the fifth.”





XII

A WEEK later, the hour being still well short of noon, Cliquot, reclining on a blue satin cushion in the window of Mrs. Vernon's chamber, roused himself and looked into the garden. Then he scrambled to all four of his ridiculous pipe-stem legs and began to bark shrilly, hysterically. Cliquot's bark was so many sizes too large for his diminutive body that the recoil lifted his front feet from the ground, adding visibly to his extreme agitation.

Mrs. Vernon, robed in lace and pale-blue ribbons, pleaded for silence, then commanded, and at length scolded. Cliquot, his protec-

tive instinct fully aroused, paid no heed to cajolery or threat, and presently his mistress laid aside her pen, arose with a sigh from the writing-table, and trailed to the window. After a moment, half turning toward an open door,

“Beryl,” she asked, “who are those men in the garden?”

“Mr. Shortland and Perkins. Also Dobbin,” replied a voice from the adjoining room.

“But what are they doing? And why didn’t you tell me Mr. Shortland was here?”

“As to what they are doing, I haven’t the slightest idea. They seem to be discussing the roses. And as Mr. Shortland has not asked for us, I presume he doesn’t want to see us.”

“Well”—Mrs. Vernon stepped in front of the dressing-table and bent to see her reflection in the mirror, patting her hair deftly—“well, you had better go down, dear. I’ll follow presently.”

“I don’t see why,” demurred Beryl. “Evidently Mr. Shortland is not calling on us, but on Perkins.”



“How absurd!” murmured her mother, shedding her lace and ribbons. “Of course he wants to see us, Beryl.” Mrs. Vernon pressed a button, and a bell tinkled somewhere downstairs. “I do wonder why he and Perkins are tramping around the garden like that. Cliquot, *will* you be still a minute? He hates the sight of Mr. Shortland’s dog, Beryl.”

“Well, he isn’t a very beautiful dog, Mama. They are coming back to the house now.” Without seeing, one would have known that Beryl was withdrawing from the proximity of the window as she spoke.

“Are you dressed to go down?” asked her mother.

“Dressed and in my right mind, dear; and my right mind tells me that a modest and proper young lady doesn’t rush out into the garden to receive gentlemen.”

“Don’t be so absurd, dear! Mr. Shortland isn’t a stranger; he’s—he’s quite like one of the family. Besides, we certainly have a right to know what he is up to in our garden.”

“Very well, Mama; I’ll go down and stand on the steps. If he sees me and sees fit to

“speak, I will ask him. But you mustn't expect me to rush down the street after him!”

“You are getting more absurd every day,” replied Mrs. Vernon abstractedly. “Come in! Jennie, get my—is it very hot to-day?”

“Yes, ma'am; Perkins says it's 'a scorcher'.”

“Then, the thinnest thing you can find, Jennie. Has any one called?”

“No, ma'am; at least, not properly *called*, ma'am.”

“Which means?”

“Mr. Shortland came around to the kitchen door a little while ago, and asked for Perkins, ma'am, and Perkins and he went off together somewhere——”

“What ho, the house!” called a voice from below.

“That's him now,” giggled Jennie.

“Tell him we'll be down in a few minutes, Jennie. Aren't you nearly ready, Beryl?”

“Quite,” replied Beryl composedly, appearing at the doorway. She was dressed in a white skirt and a shirt-waist, and Mrs. Vernon viewed her dubiously.

“With all the nice morning gowns you have, dear,” she said in mild disapproval, “it seems to me——”

Beryl laughed softly. “Mama, you are perfectly ridiculous on the subject of Mr. Shortland! Perhaps you’d like me to put on an evening gown?”

“Nonsense! But one might as well look one’s best, for Mr. Shortland or any one else. For goodness’ sake, Jennie, you don’t expect me to wear that thing, do you? Why, you know it’s a perfect mess!”

“You said the thinnest thing you had,” murmured the maid, hurrying back to the closet.

Beryl laughed and disappeared. She found Allan leaning in the doorway. Dobbin, with hanging tongue, stood half-way down the path to the gate, silently begging his master to follow.

“Didn’t Jennie ask you to come in, Mr. Shortland?”

“I am giving my famous impersonation of a peri at the Gate of Paradise, Miss Vernon.”

“A peri was a naughty angel, wasn’t he?”

You don't look terribly much like an angel, even a naughty one."

"But you do, a nice, cool, white angel floating down the stairs to admit the poor, forlorn peri."

"Will the peri please tell us what he has been doing in the garden?" she asked, leading the way across the library to the porch.

"Finding a location for the dove-cot," he replied calmly.

"The dove-cot!"

"Yes, and I think we have the very place. Perkins and I went over the matter very carefully. Perkins doesn't quite know what a dove-cot is, but he was kind enough to approve of the location I proposed. Don't you think that in the centre there, where the large bed of roses is, would be about right?"

"But—but I didn't know—there was to be a dove-cot!"

"Oh, yes, and a very nice one, too! Mr. Haley is making it, and the post will be along in a day or two, and after that there is only the paint to put on. Mr. Haley, I find, had set his heart on having it blue—or was it red?"



—but I decided in favor of pure, immaculate white. Don't you agree with me?"

"Quite," responded Beryl.

Allan looked greatly relieved. "I thought perhaps Mrs. Vernon would like to know the position we had decided on," he went on amiably.

"She might," agreed Beryl gravely. "After all, it is her garden, in a way."

"That's what I said to Perkins. So I thought I'd step in a minute and see her."

"She will be right down, Mr. Shortland. You will find magazines on the table there, and I can find you a cigar if you like. Or perhaps you prefer your pipe?"

"Oh! Are you going to leave me?"

"Certainly! You have just said you stepped in to see Mama, and, as I have letters to write——"

"Oh, but I especially wanted you to be present at the interview, Miss Vernon. I had set my heart on that. You see, the location of a dove-cot is no light matter——"

"But it appears to be all settled."

"Pending your approval."

“We-ell, but I really have some letters to write, Mr. Shortland; most important ones. Mama will be down in just a minute.”

But she didn't go beyond the library door. Perhaps, after all, the letters were not awfully important, or perhaps the expression of disappointment on his countenance moved her, or perhaps she didn't really want to go herself. At all events, with one small white pump on the sill she paused, and Allan, realizing that heroic measures were necessary if he was to detain her, announced:

“I had a letter from Kenneth Leeds yesterday, Miss Vernon.”

“Oh!” The foot came back from the sill, and the violet eyes dilated a little, and possibly the warmth in the smooth cheeks deepened a mite. “Indeed?”

“Yes, it was written nearly a month ago and had been chasing me around. He announced his engagement and asked me to be one of his ushers. The wedding is to take place in New York, in September—the fifteenth, I think. The lady's name is Miss Cecile Schoemann, and he assures me she is charming.”



“Really? And do you know who they are, Mr. Shortland?”

She had seated herself on the arm of a chair, and Allan breathed easier.

“The Schomanns? No, I don’t recall the name. But that means nothing. They may be quite prominent, for I am not well acquainted in Pittsburgh. I understand, however, that the city is so full of millionaires that the traffic is impeded on fine days. Doubtless the Schomanns are—er—impediments.”

“Shall you—accept?”

“I can’t say. September is a long way off. It is hard to know where one may be two months from now, although I hope——” He stopped and smiled, and Beryl smiled back at him, for no reason save that it was difficult not to.

“What do you hope, Mr. Shortland?” she asked.

“So many things,” he answered lightly after a moment. Then, with sudden gravity, “I hope, for one thing,” he said, “that I have not blundered in speaking of Leeds, Miss Vernon.”

“Blundered?” She raised her brows questioningly. “I’m afraid I don’t understand, Mr. Shortland.”

“Which means ‘Mind your own business, sir!’” he returned, with a smile. She dropped her gaze. After a moment.

“If you think—that,” she asked, “why did you—do it?”

“Do you want the real truth, Miss Vernon?”

“Why—of course!”

“Because I wanted to find out whether—the incident was really closed.”

“Really, Mr. Shortland! Your interest is flattering, undoubtedly, but——”

“Also impertinent?” he asked. “If you think that, I am sorry. I make you my best apology, Miss Vernon. I even humble myself in the dust. I can afford to grovel since I have discovered what I wanted.”

“Indeed? And what is the discovery, Mr. Shortland?”

“That you don’t care a button any more, Miss Vernon. I wonder if you ever did—really, you know?”

“I think, if you don't mind, we will not discuss my sentiments toward Mr. Leeds.”

“Bless you, I don't want to! I am fond of Leeds, and I'm glad I can keep on being fond of him. I think—yes, I think I'll cable him to count on me at the wedding.”

“It will probably be a great load off his mind,” said Beryl, with elaborate sarcasm.

Allan laughed, and his brown eyes twinkled merrily. “Do you know, Miss Vernon, I positively love the chap this morning?”

“Really? I'm afraid, however, that doesn't interest me, Mr. Shortland. I'll see what is keeping Mama.”

“I'd rather you stayed,” he begged.

“Thank you, but——” She regarded him frowningly. “Do you know, Mr. Shortland, that you are exceedingly tiresome this morning?”

“I'm sorry, really,” he answered contritely. “But if it is only this morning I am relieved. I feared it might be chronic.”

Beryl almost sniffed. “There seems to be danger of that, Mr. Shortland.” She smiled coolly, nodded, and went. She did not return.



XIII

“I DON’T see,” said Mrs. Vernon, “why you are so hard on Mr. Shortland, Beryl. I thought you rather liked him.”

“I haven’t said that I don’t, that I am aware of,” replied Beryl, with a yawn that seemed too perfect to be true.

“Well, perhaps not, but you have certainly slammed him——”

“Mama! Such awful slang!”

“Slammed him,” continued her mother, with emphasis on the word, “a dozen times in the last ten minutes.”

“I only said that he seemed superficial and idle and—and insincere.”

“Only that?” asked Mrs. Vernon ironically. “You must like him, then, a great deal, my dear.”

“I don’t see,” answered the girl a trifle irritably, “that it is necessary that I should either like him or dislike him. Mr. Shortland is merely an acquaintance of a month, and I decline to—to——”

“Well?” prompted Mrs. Vernon.

But Beryl did not complete her sentence. Instead, “I think,” she observed, “it is perfectly ghastly the way you and every other woman here treat him, Mama!”

“Good Heavens, Beryl! And how is that?”

“Why, you just let him say or do anything he pleases, and sit and beam on him as though he were a sort of—of little god. Any one would think you were all quite daffy about him.”

“Daffy?” murmured her mother. “Such awful slang, dear!”

“Well, you do! It’s sickening. Even Mrs. Follen has caught it. She stopped me on the porch at the club-house yesterday afternoon, tapped me on the arm with her fan in that silly

way of hers, you know, and simpered, 'Where is that nice Mr. Shortland, Beryl? I suppose he isn't *very* far away, my dear?' I told her I hadn't the slightest idea where Mr. Shortland might be. 'Well, I did want to see him so,' she went on. 'He is going to tell me about having my rugs cleaned. He says you should wash them in milk. He's such a fascinating man, I think! So—so sympathetic and *understanding!*' " And Beryl, who had cleverly parodied Mrs. Follen's speech and facial grimaces, laughed exasperatedly, arose from her chair, and laid the book she had been holding but not reading none too gently on the table. "Silly old thing!" she muttered. "I suppose if Mr. Shortland told her to wash her rugs in ink, she'd do it! I am going to write some letters."

Mrs. Vernon smiled, but the smile held perplexity.

"Dear me!" she murmured, as she wiggled her pretty fingers in the bowl of soapy water. "I didn't suspect that she cared that much for him!"

She dried her hand slowly and thoughtfully.

“I think,” she added to herself and Cliquot, “I’ll have to ask Whittier to find out something about this Mr. Shortland.”

Allan was in disgrace, a state of affairs which had endured for two days, ever since, in fact, that morning conversation on the porch. If Allan surmised wherein he had erred, he knew more than did Beryl herself. She only knew that Mr. Shortland had suddenly become very tiresome and distasteful to her, and that she disliked him extremely. In consequence she avoided him so brazenly that Alderbury smiled behind its hand, and when forced to meet him she snubbed him unmercifully. Allan preserved an unchanged attitude of admiration and attentiveness, and, if he was aware of being in disgrace, failed to show it, a fact which served to exasperate the lady even more.

“Every one spoils him so,” she told herself contemptuously, “that he’s just a mass of conceit and doesn’t know when—when he isn’t wanted!”

Of course they did meet constantly, for in so small a place as Alderbury only immure-



ment in one's bedroom saved one from encountering every one else at least twice in the twenty-four hours. And Beryl had no intention of letting her dislike of Allan interfere with her enjoyment. She didn't want to see him, she assured herself, and she hoped she wouldn't, but she wasn't going to stay away from the club-house on his account. She even danced with him at the Saturday night hop. She didn't care to, of course, but he insisted after half a dozen rebuffs, and it would have looked too pointed to have refused again. He didn't even ask, as would have been proper, what he had done to merit her coldness. That annoyed her, too, although she didn't know how she could have answered such a question had he asked it.

The dove-cot was erected a few days later, with appropriate ceremonies. Allan himself issued the invitations, in Mrs. Vernon's name, and all Alderbury was bidden, and all Alderbury came. "More of that delightful Mr. Shortland's fun," declared the ladies. "Another of Shortland's jokes," chuckled the men. The garden was well filled when Perkins and



the gardener—the latter divided his labors among a number of places—raised the dove-cot and set its white post in the hole that had been dug in the middle of the oval rosebed, while a group of ladies who preferred shade to sunlight looked on from the porch. Allan explained that it had been his intention to have the guests join hands and dance about the dove-cot to the sweet and simple strains of a flageolet, but that he had been unable to find a flageolet in the village. Several of his hearers expressed relief, and Allan went on to say that instead of the dancing, the lack of which was to be greatly regretted, they would have tea and refreshments on the porch. The dove-cot was properly admired, and several ladies were heard to declare that they meant to have them in their own gardens.

“Such a clever idea,” said Mrs. Purdy, an elderly and very deaf dowager in heliotrope, “and so decorative and—and rural, Mrs. Vernon. Ah—what is it for, my dear?”

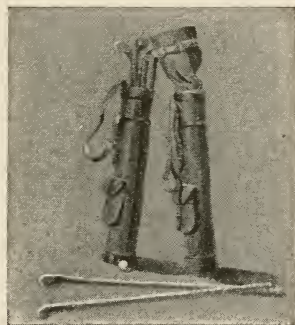
“Pigeons,” explained Mrs. Vernon loudly.

“Indeed? Do you know, my dear, I’ve always thought a widgeon was a sort of duck?”

Stupid of me, wasn't it? For, of course, ducks don't fly, at least, I don't think they do, and I see no way for them to walk up to the cute little house."

"Not widgeons," corrected Mrs. Vernon. "Pigeons!"

"Oh, *pigeons!* Of course, my dear! And an excellent idea, too. I heard of a man who made a great deal of money with them. I think they had peculiar tails or something. At least, they were rather out of the ordinary and brought quite fancy prices. I must come and see them some day, my dear."





XIV

“You speak as though it was already over,” said Allan.

“It will soon be the first of August,” responded Beryl, “and that is the beginning of the end. I shall not be sorry. It has been a rather stupid summer so far.”

They were seated on the porch, a few evenings later, Beryl in the chaise-longue and Allan beside her, so close that he could have laid his hand on hers where it lay, dimly white, in the half darkness, along the broad arm of her chair. As on many other evenings of the passing summer, the air was languid and fragrant with the scent of the sleeping flow-

ers, a moon swam in and out of fleecy clouds, and, save for the low sound of voices from the open doorway and the elfin whispers from the garden, the night out there was very still. For a while she had resisted his efforts to draw her away from the players, wandering restlessly from table to table, her mood a strange mixture of vivacity and abstraction. And yet finally she had indifferently yielded to his request.

“You will be in Boston this winter?” asked Allan. “Or shall you go to Washington?”

“We usually go to Washington for a month or so while Congress is in session. Mama likes it.”

“It’s a curious place,” he said reflectively, “and, I think, interesting. A sort of Port Saïd, where East and West meet.”

“It is quite hopeless socially,” she remarked. Her tone held such a suggestion of snobbery that he almost winced. Then in the next instant he smiled in the darkness.

“That matters with you?” he asked lightly.

“Why, very naturally,” she answered.

“Perhaps, then,” he said, “that explains

your present attitude toward me." She knew he was smiling, although his face was in shadow. "You have discovered that I am socially a hopeless outsider, Miss Vernon?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Shortland; I have made no discoveries about you. As for my present attitude, as you called it, is it different from—any other?"

"Very. A week or so ago you didn't go out of your way to avoid me, Miss Vernon."

"Really? And do I now? Or seem to?"

"Yes, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I haven't thought much about it, Mr. Shortland. I hope I have not been impolite?"

"Rather," he responded.

"Really, Mr. Shortland!" she exclaimed.

"Well, you asked," he said. "I am not conscious of having done anything to displease you, Miss Vernon. If I have, I am sorry. Let us start fresh again. Shall we?"

"Is it necessary to start at all?"

"I'm afraid it is—for me," he replied gently. She made no answer. "Suppose,



Miss Vernon, we sponge out last week and go back to where we were before.”

“I fear I don't remember just where that was,” she said uninterestedly.

“We were well along on a very pleasant friendship,” he replied. “Let us go back there. Shall we?”

“If you like.”

“You are not enthusiastic,” he said, with a smile. “I had dared to hope that you had missed my—nonsense a little.”

“Isn't nonsense something one can do fairly well without?”

“Bless you, no! It's one of the most indispensable things.”

“I haven't found it so,” she responded sweetly.

“That's disheartening.” He sighed. “It implies that I am no more indispensable than my nonsense. I had thought—or even hoped—that you found me—well, mildly amusing, perhaps even interesting.”

“I have, Mr. Shortland; quite amusing.”

“And interesting?”

“Doesn't amusement imply interest?”

“I think there’s a distinction, Miss Vernon.”

“You attempt too many distinctions this evening, Mr. Shortland. My brain isn’t capable of following them all.”

“I see I shall have to be satisfied for the present with being merely amusing.”

“I thought that that was—shall I say?—your main ambition, Mr. Shortland?”

“No. If I have any main ambition——”

“Which you haven’t!” she interrupted. “And that’s what—what——” She stopped rather breathlessly.

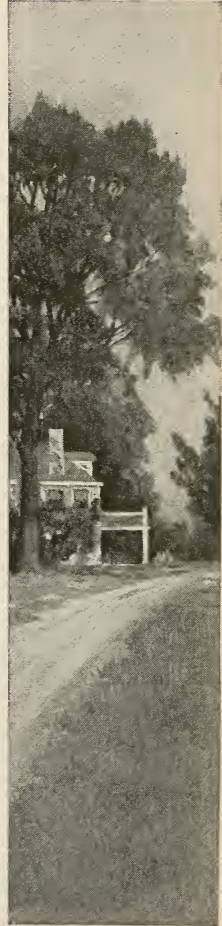
“What you hold against me?” he asked encouragingly.

“Yes,” she replied defiantly, “if you must know. And—and I hate it! To do nothing but amuse yourself, to be—be just a dawdler, a—a harlequin to make people laugh, to take nothing seriously—even yourself—oh, it’s—disgusting!”

She ended with a little gasp that might have expressed either relief or temerity. He waited a moment, and then, as she did not go on, he said slowly:

“Do I really seem as bad as that to you? A dawdler—a harlequin—taking nothing seriously!” He was silent a moment. “A dawdler, yes; harlequin if you like; but for the rest—my dear, I take things so seriously that I can afford to laugh! It is not I who make a joke of life, but those who go about with sorry faces; for they pretend that existence is mean and paltry, a thing to be endured instead of enjoyed. They make of it a tawdry and sombre tragedy, with here and there a grudging smile by way of ‘comic relief.’ I see life as a pleasant comedy, an idyllic farce, if you like, a thing of dancing and singing, of smiles and laughter, with the ‘sunlight screen’ always on and the orchestra always playing. Why, in my play a sober look is only used for its contrast value, a sigh is sighed to the trilling of the piccolo, and there’s never a tear written into a part! Come, now, which is the better amusement for the moment, mine or theirs?”

“Oh, I can’t argue” she answered rebelliously. “You make it sound right but—but it isn’t! Life isn’t a farce, and there are far more tears than laughter.”



“Only because there are more weepers than laughers. Why not be a laugher? You say life isn't a farce, but it is, a joyous, merry, whimsical farce. What else could it be on such a stage, with such a setting, with a billion and a half of actors tumbled on to it, jostling and crowding, tripping and falling, elbowing for the centre of the stage, stealing each other's business, forgetting their lines—for there's no prompter in the wings—and all playing, ill or well, the rôles that the Great Playwright has given them? No farce, you say! Heigho, but a very devil of a farce!”

“And—and that is all that life means to you? Just—just an excuse for laughter, for play——”

“Laughter needs no excuse.” Then, more soberly, “Shall I tell you what life does mean to me? It means being happy oneself and making others happy. Only that.”

“And not necessarily—good?” she asked.

“Being happy is being good, and being good is being happy. Sin is only another name for unhappiness.”

“And you think that doing great things,

great deeds, for the betterment of the world, is not necessary?"

"Great deeds, or little deeds, that help others to be happy are quite within my scheme. Some of us can do only little deeds, but perhaps, since we can do so many of them, we equalize matters."

"Happiness!" she sighed. "With you, then, there is only that; nothing beyond!"

"No, there is nothing beyond happiness! There could not be. Happiness is the sum of it all. It is the present and the future reward. 'Be good,' says the moralist, 'and you will be happy.' 'Believe in God and obey His laws,' says the priest, 'and you will be happy now and hereafter.' Hereafter, by all means, but now, too, if you please!"

"You are a humanitarian!"

"Doubtless. *And* a harlequin. *And* a dawdler."

"And—and very irritating!"

"Many irritants are beneficial."

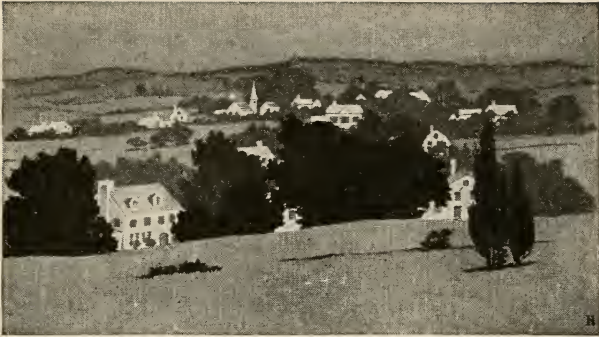
"But unpleasant! There, I didn't mean to say that, Mr. Shortland. You—goaded me into it."

“I’m very glad you didn’t mean it. If you had, I’d—well, I fear I shouldn’t have found the courage to ask the question that I’ve been wanting to ask for some time, and which I had firmly resolved to ask this evening.”

“What question, Mr. Shortland?”

“This, Miss Vernon: will you marry me?”





XV

“MR. SHORTLAND!”

“Yes, I suppose I have selected an unfortunate moment,” he said calmly. “And I am afraid you want to say no.”

“I most certainly——”

“But you won’t just yet because I haven’t presented my case. And I really have a very strong case, Beryl. You see, I’ve been in love with you for four years, and that’s quite a long time when you consider that I’ve had nothing to base any hopes upon except the possession of a ring.”

“That’s positively absurd!” she said, almost angrily. “You must think me very—

very innocent to tell such a tale. As if a man could fall in love with a girl like that!"

"No? But I did. It is so very easy to fall in love in Venice, and so very much easier to fall in love with you! Why, any one could do it without half trying! I did it instantly, and take pride in the fact that there wasn't a moment's hesitation. And then I spent four years looking for you up and down the world. Oh, I don't mean"—at a protesting gesture from Beryl—"that I have wandered about all this time with no other aim than to find you. I was never the disconsolate lover. I knew that somewhere, some time, I'd find you again, although it might perhaps be too late. You see, I didn't know even your nationality. I guessed you were English, but as the freshness of the mental picture of you wore off I had my doubts. Then you might have been German, perhaps, French, Russian, almost anything; but always beautiful."

"Mr. Shortland, won't you please——"

"It was queer that I never seriously thought you might be a countrywoman, although there are always many Americans in

Venice. I suppose it was because the manner of our meeting, the scene, the moment, were all so romantic, and one, somehow, does not associate romance with Americans, or, at least, the romance of the Old World. And so I told myself that, since I didn't know your country, much less your town, the only way to find you was to join hands with Chance and haunt the highways. For I argued that one who travels once, travels again. My error, however, was in thinking you would come back to Venice. And yet—most folks do, sooner or later. So will you."

"Mr. Shortland, you are only making it more—embarrassing. I——"

"Oh, wait, please! I want you to know first. So that was why I kept from the backwaters during those four years, why I followed the broad highway that leads around the world. My dear, I've almost found you so many times! But always it was never quite you. I wondered about you a great deal. I had only your features to start on, but, like the scientists who construct a prehistoric creature from a single bone, I fashioned you

in my mind and endowed you with all the charms."

"That was a dangerous thing to do," said the girl in low tones.

"You mean that I might have been disappointed? I don't think so." He paused a moment. "Well, like the man who traversed the earth in search for a four-leaved clover and found it by his door-step in the end, I looked for you around the globe and found you at last almost in my door-yard. I turned the corner of this porch that morning and saw you and felt almost no surprise, only a great gladness. All along I've imagined the meeting happening just as simply, just as casually, just as unexpectedly. There was no premonition. There never had been. Some days I have awakened and thought, 'To-day I shall find her!' and have been happier for it, but the promise was never fulfilled."

"That first day you came," said Beryl wonderingly, "I was here and saw you."

"By all the laws of psychology I should have known it, but I didn't. And yet I wonder if it was only chance that sent me doubling



back on my trail a few days later. I hadn't meant to return. But one morning—I had spent the night at a little hotel in a village somewhere beyond here—I walked out of the door and deliberately turned back the way I had come. And so I found you. That is all. And now what are you going to do with me, Beryl?"

There was a long moment of silence before she spoke.

"It is all very strange, what you have told me," she began hesitatingly. "I—I ought to feel flattered. I do, Mr. Shortland. But—oh, what can I say? It almost seems as if Fate had played a joke with us. Now that you have found me, I am not the girl you searched for, Mr. Shortland, for she—she would have known and—and cared!"

"And you don't, Beryl? Even a little?"

"Not like that. I mean—I don't want to marry you. I—I don't want to marry any one! I don't want to love any one! I did once and——"

"Very much?" he asked gently as she stopped.



“I don't know. I only know that—it hurt—horribly! And so I don't want ever to care again. You understand, don't you?”

“Yes, I understand,” he answered slowly.

“And you won't try to—make me—will you?” she begged.

“Do you think I could?” he asked. “Are you—afraid of that?”

“N-no, only—if you'd promise—”

“You are asking me to go away?”

“Oh, no! I—don't want you to do that. I only want you to—to——”

“Keep to the middle course?” he asked, with a smile. “My dear, I'm away off it already, and I can never get back to it. That's out of the question. I might go away from you, but—well, I shan't. You don't need me yet; perhaps you never will; but I need you very badly, and I—well, I shall keep on wanting and hoping.”

“But when I've told you that I don't—care for you,” she said troubledly, “it seems that——”

“I might believe you? But are you quite certain that you don't, Beryl?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you have been listening to wounded pride for so long that you can't hear your heart, dear.”

“My heart only tells me to beware,” she answered bitterly.

“No, that's your pride speaking.”

“Then, I don't believe—I have any heart,” she sighed.

He laughed softly. “Some day you will find that you have, and then there'll be no thought of pride, for you'll hear nothing but just your heart.”

There was silence for a moment. Then,

“I almost wish——” she said softly, and paused.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing!” She laughed uncertainly. “I'm afraid you think me a very silly person, Mr. Shortland. I've talked a lot of nonsense, I fear. Perhaps we both have. Let's be sensible now. Shall we?”

“By all means! Does that mean that you are going to accept me?”

“No. It means that I—am grateful to you

for—for caring for me, and am sorry that I can't do as you want, Mr. Shortland. And it means that I want to be friends again, just as we were before I behaved so nastily. And that's as near an apology as I shall offer!"

"Very well," he answered cheerfully. "Friends as before."

"And you're not to try to—you know!"

"Miss Vernon, the Declaration of Independence declares that all men are created equal and endowed with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And I, as a good citizen of this republic, insist on being allowed to continue the pursuit of happiness."

"Happiness!" she said, and he surmised the little frown that accompanied the word. "With you it all comes back to just that, doesn't it?"

"Just that," he agreed. "The sum of all that is best in life."

"I shall call you the Happy Man," she said. "Shall we go in now?"

"I had rather you made me a happy man," he answered. "Perhaps we had better."



XVI

AUGUST came in with a week of cold and rain, during which open fireplaces blazed and the settlement read all the books with which it had provided itself in June, answered all the letters that had been staring accusingly from many tables, and, in short, did many things it ought to have done, and, possibly, left undone many things it ought not to have done. But, naturally, bridge and auction and dancing flourished, and the several flirtations and the fewer love-affairs progressed rapidly. There's nothing like a spell of rainy weather to bring along a love-affair, and on the fifth day, Alderbury had an engagement to talk

over. Neither of the principals is known to us, however. One affair that made no perceptible progress was Allan's. He and Beryl met every day somewhere, and frankly enjoyed each other's society. They had agreed to return to the old footing, and apparently had done so, but each was conscious of a difference in their relations. An avowed lover can never quite slip back into the old rôle of friend, try as hard as he may. Beryl did her best to pretend that Allan's proposal and confession had made no difference in her feelings towards him, but she never succeeded in deceiving herself or Allan. They sat together, walked together, danced together, and once or twice played golf together; but Allan easily saw that Beryl was more self-conscious, more constrained than before, and that the advent of a third person brought relief.

If Beryl had expected him to show disappointment at her refusal to marry him, she was mistaken. Her repulse had evidently cast no shadow on his spirits. Certainly no one would have guessed that he was a despairing lover. In fact, Beryl began to wonder whether



he was a lover of any kind! Of course she had meant it—or had thought she meant it, which is much the same—when she had asked him not to try to make her care for him, but she had certainly not expected him to present quite such a cheerful front to the world, nor so sedulously to refrain from even the semblance of love-making! Certainly a little latitude was permissible, in spite of her injunction; which, by the way, he had refused to obey. But Allan said no more of love, nor again alluded to their talk that evening. He was all attention, claimed as much of her society as she would allow, and up to a certain point was as gallant and admiring a cavalier as maiden could wish. But beyond that point he never ventured by look, word, or deed, and Beryl, conscious of a dismay she could not understand, began to wonder whether it was possible that he had philosophically decided to give up the pursuit of the unattainable. Of course, she told herself, if he had, it was much better for him, and a relief to her, only—well, he had not seemed to her to be such a fickle person as that would imply! And then,



one afternoon, a perfectly plausible explanation was supplied her.

George Smith had wandered in late, and Beryl, who had been upstairs, had heard her mother conduct him to the porch and, later, had heard the low hum of voices and the occasional rattle of a cup and saucer. There had been a shower in the middle of the afternoon, and Mrs. Vernon had countermanded the order for the carriage, and Beryl had taken a book up to her room and settled down to read. But the story had proved stupid, and when Mr. Smith had remained for some time, and presumably would soon go on his way again, she went down the stairs and turned into the library to gain the porch. But just short of the doorway she paused.

“Mr. Shortland!” exclaimed her mother startledly. “To be married?”

“Yes, dear lady,” replied Mr. Smith’s voice. “It does sound a bit odd, doesn’t it?” He laughed. “Fancy ‘China’ married and settled down!”

Beryl stepped back out of sight, a hand at her throat.

“Doubtless,” returned Mrs. Vernon, recovering, “he will make an excellent husband. But how queer that—well, it seems that one might have heard of it before. He never mentioned it himself.”

“Oh, he makes no secret of it. He told a crowd of us at the club-house one day. Major Preston asked if the lady was Chinese!” Smith giggled.

“How absurd! Did he say who she was, Mr. Smith?”

“No; rather implied that it was none of our business. Didn’t even know when it was to be, I think.”

“Don’t you suppose that perhaps it was just one of his jokes?” asked Mrs. Vernon, anxiety expressing itself in spite of her.

“Not a bit of it! No joke about that, dear lady! He was a bit waxy, in fact, because we didn’t believe him. Well, it will be the end of a good feller!” And Smith sighed regretfully.

“But — when was this, Mr. Smith? Lately?”

“God bless you, dear lady, no! It must

have been only a day or two after he came. No, it's no one around here; that's certain. It's some one he met on the other side somewhere; seems to me he said in Florence. Well, whoever she is, she'll have her work cut out with Shortland. 'Pon my word, Mrs. Vernon, he's likely to get up from the breakfast-table some fine morning and calmly announce that he's off to Patagonia at ten-thirty! He is, for a fact. He's a queer duffer, no two ways about it!"

Beryl went softly out of the library and up the stairs. In her room, she closed the door behind her and walked slowly across to the windows. For several minutes she stood there, looking out into the dripping garden. The sun had come out gloriously and every leaf and blade sparkled. About the dove-cot three pigeons fluttered, and a fourth stood on the ledge and busily preened its feathers. On the porch below, Mr. Smith was tapping a boot with his crop, preparatory to leaving. Beryl turned away and walked to the mirror. The face that looked back at her was white and strange and the big violet eyes were hard.



“You little fool,” she whispered contemptuously, “wasn’t once enough for you?”

Presently she went back to the chair by the window, picked up her book, and methodically found her place. But instead of reading she sat looking straight over it to where a spot of sunlight trembled on the faded rose-border of the rug. After awhile she aroused herself with a shiver on her slim shoulders, closed the book, and dropped it to the floor. Her mother’s footsteps sounded on the stairway. She arose wearily and began to unhook her gown. One must dress for dinner just the same.

“And he, too, was just pretending,” she murmured scornfully. “All the time he was engaged to be married. I wonder”—something like a sob escaped her—“if that’s his idea of making people—happy!”



XVII

“I HEARD such a queer thing about Mr. Shortland this afternoon,” observed Mrs. Vernon at dinner. She spoke carelessly, with only a fleeting glance at the face across the table. “Mr. Smith says he is to be married.”

“Mr. Smith or Mr. Shortland?” asked Beryl uninterestedly.

“Mr. Shortland. Do you suppose it can be so?”

“I don’t see why not, Mama. Possibly he has tired of roaming around and wants to settle down.”

“But it seems strange that we have never heard of it,” puzzled her mother.

“Perhaps he thought it was none of our business, dear.”

“Well——” Mrs. Vernon found an opportunity to study Beryl’s countenance, but learned little. “Nevertheless, I think he has been sailing under false colors,” she declared severely.

“Still, Mama, if Mr. Smith knew it——”

“Yes, and he says all the men at the club knew it. I think it is very strange that no one mentioned it. Men are so annoyingly close-mouthed at times.”

“After all,” replied Beryl, calmly, “I don’t think we need to worry ourselves about Mr. Shortland’s affairs, Mama. If he wants to get married, I presume he has a perfect right to. I don’t suppose he thought it necessary to consult us before taking the plunge.”

“It would have been fairer, however, to have made it known, Beryl.”

“It sounds, dear, as though he had been trifling with your affections,” said Beryl gayly. “After all, even if he were free, there is still Papa, you know!”

Mrs. Vernon viewed her daughter puzzledly,



sighed, and relapsed into silence. Perhaps, she thought, she had been mistaken, after all.

But Beryl's rôle of indifference was not an easy one to persist in, and after another day or two Mrs. Vernon knew that she had not been mistaken. Beryl's attitude toward Allan, at first no different from what it had been, soon altered in spite of her efforts to guard against it. Her manner became cold, and more than once she was guilty of speech scarcely less than rude. Allan was perplexed, but he kept the fact to himself. Even Mrs. Vernon, he noticed, was different. The difference was hard to define, but it was there. She seemed glad to see him when they met, but the heartiness of her welcome had gone. In some way, he knew, he had offended. But Mrs. Vernon's attitude troubled him very much less than Beryl's. At the end of three days the latter had become so antagonistic that Allan's philosophy was disturbed, and he sought an explanation. The opportunity came at Mrs. Prescott's, whither Alderbury had resorted at the end of a warm afternoon to drink tea. Allan, watching his chance,

finally found Beryl for a moment alone at an end of the long veranda. The smile with which she acknowledged his approach was palpably artificial.

“How have I offended?” he asked gravely.

Beryl's brows went up, and her violet eyes opened very wide and round. “Offended?” she echoed. “Offended whom, pray, Mr. Shortland?”

“You principally, Miss Vernon. Your mother as well, I judge.”

“You have not offended me, Mr. Shortland. I'm afraid you are the victim of a guilty conscience. Isn't there a story about a murderer who——”

“I'm sure there is, Miss Vernon. But won't you tell me? I thought that we had agreed to start over, but something has happened. Wouldn't it be fair to tell me what it is?”

“How ridiculous!” Beryl laughed faintly, dropping her eyes before the grave concern of his gaze. “Nothing has happened that I am aware of, Mr. Shortland.”

“Then, your treatment of me is merely a

whim?" he asked, with a slight hardening of his voice.

"My treatment?" she asked carelessly. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Mr. Shortland."

"I think you do. It is I who don't understand. For the last few days you have shown me very plainly that I am not welcome, Miss Vernon. I hoped that if I had unconsciously offended, you would be frank enough to tell me."

"Your conscience, then, is quite clear?" she asked, with a flash of her eyes.

"Quite."

"A convenient one, Mr. Shortland, to have."

"I don't understand," he said perplexedly.

"Or don't wish to," she replied, with a sarcastic laugh.

"On the contrary," he answered patiently, "I have every wish to."

A very cruel light gleamed in the violet eyes as she said, "I can forgive anything, Mr. Shortland, but hypocrisy."

He drew back with a sudden stiffening of

his body. "A most detestable quality, Miss Vernon," he answered coldly. "Injustice is another, I think." He lifted his hat and walked away.

He came very seldom to Solana after that. He did not absent himself altogether, however, but his occasional visits were timed when Beryl was away or when, as he knew, he would find other visitors present. Beryl told herself that she was glad, and tried very hard to feel so. Mrs. Vernon, who was incapable of remembering an injury for any length of time, soon took him back into her good graces, and complained plaintively once or twice that he had deserted them. She did not, however, press the charge, for she realized that to Beryl he was no longer welcome. Jerry Forbes, who had grown discouraged, took heart again, and became assiduous in his attentions. And Beryl was very kind to him, and Alderbury looked on enjoyingly.

Jerry, who, even when Allan had crowded him out of Beryl's society, had remained a whole-hearted admirer of the older man, came nearer to a correct interpretation of affairs



than others. "That yarn of Shortland's about being engaged was all rot," he decided. "He's too decent a chap to make love to Beryl Vernon if he wasn't free. He proposed and she turned him down. That's all there is to it. Darned if I see why she didn't take him, but she didn't, and I'm not pretending I'm sorry!" Nevertheless, for all his assurance that Allan was out of the running, he confided an item of news about that gentleman one morning with some uneasiness. He and Beryl were in his car on their way to Lincoln Falls, where Alderbury's golfers were to play in a tournament.

"Shortland's off again," he announced very casually.

"Off?" she asked, after a slight instant of hesitation.

"He's leaving to-morrow." He managed a quick glance at her which told him nothing. She was looking ahead quite untroubledly. "Going up to the mountains, I think he said."

"Indeed? From what one hears about Mr. Shortland, he has remained here quite an unprecedented length of time, hasn't he?"

“By Jove, yes! Rather a compliment to—to us, eh?”

“Decidedly.” Silence held while the car shot down a long smooth hill under rustling branches and purred around a corner. Then, “I believe Mr. Shortland is to be married, is he not?” she said, in the tone of one making conversation.

“Married? Why”—Jerry faltered—“I didn’t suppose so!”

“Really? I’m sure I heard some one say so, Mr. Forbes.”

“Well, but—did he say anything to you——” Then Jerry stopped and colored.

“To me?” she asked in surprise. “Mr. Shortland doesn’t confide in me to that extent, Mr. Forbes. I merely heard—I believe Mr. Smith mentioned it—that he had announced the fact that he was to be married one day at the club.”

“Yes, he did,” muttered Jerry. “Just the same—I didn’t believe it.”

“How funny!” she laughed. “Why not?”

“Well, because——” But Jerry couldn’t give his real reason.

“That sounds like a woman, Mr. Forbes.”

“Shortland’s such a queer chap,” he murmured. “It—might have been one of his jokes.”

“Do you think so?” she asked idly. “Whose place is that over there on the hill?”

Well, she had taken it all right, he told himself, but it was funny that she had not known whether Shortland was to be married or not! This puzzled him so that he lost sight of the fact that for the rest of the journey his companion was more than usually silent.

Alderbury met the pick of Lincoln Falls talent and won. It was a very jolly occasion, and the luncheon in the club-house went off with much merriment. If Beryl was a little distraught, no one, not even Jerry, noticed it. The match was finished by five, and after tea at one of the cottages, Alderbury motored triumphantly home. Jerry, who had won his match handily, was in great spirits, and did most of the talking on the way back, while Beryl, a bit tired, as it appeared, smiled and listened—or seemed to listen—most appreciatively. Jerry was not yet so deeply in love

as to be troubled by any sense of unworthiness. Self-abnegation is not a failing of twenty-two. A mile or so short of Alderbury, the car overtook a man and a white dog walking along the side of the road, and Jerry slowed down and stopped as he drew abreast.

“Hello, Shortland! Jump in, you and the bloodhound, and we’ll give you a lift.”

Allan, who had raised his cap to Beryl, smiled and shook his head.

“Dobbin objects to motors,” he replied. “Besides, we both of us need the exercise.”

“We did ’em up,” said Jerry. “You ought to have been along, old man. Fine sport and a rattling good luncheon. Wasn’t it, Miss Vernon?”

Beryl smiled and nodded. “Splendid,” she agreed. “You should have gone, Mr. Shortland.”

“Thank you, I’d have liked it.”

“Well”—Jerry put his hand to the lever—“if you won’t jump in——”

“Mr. Forbes says you are leaving us soon,” said Beryl.

“In the morning, Miss Vernon.”

“Really? How unkind! Don’t you like our society any more?”

“Oh, yes,” he answered gravely. “It’s Dobbin. He is a victim of hay-fever, and I have to take him to the mountains, Miss Vernon.”

“What a shame!” she said.

Jerry laughed. “Where are you going to take him?” he asked. “To the Presidential Mange?”

“Horrible!” said Beryl, with a shudder. “Well, I suppose I shan’t see you again, Mr. Shortland, if you are leaving so soon.” She reached a white-gloved hand across in front of Jerry, and Allan took it for an instant.

“I made my adieus to Mrs. Vernon,” he said, “and, now that I’ve seen you here I won’t bother you again. Good-by, Miss Vernon. I’ll see you at the club, Forbes?”

“Good-by, Mr. Shortland,” said Beryl brightly, “and congratulations!”

“Congratulations?” he questioned.

“Why, yes. Isn’t it true that you are to be married? Don’t tell me that I’ve blundered on a secret, Mr. Shortland!”



Allan's answer was so long in coming that Jerry, whose gaze had been fixed on the foot that was idly pressing and releasing the clutch-pedal, looked up in surprise. He was even more surprised when he saw the expression in Allan's eyes—surprised and a little disturbed.

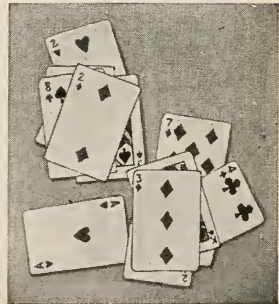
"It is true, Miss Vernon," said Allan at last, a strange emphasis in his tone. Beryl, in turn, disturbed by his look, laughed a trifle uncertainly.

"Then—then, I may congratulate you, of course."

"Thank you. You may indeed, Miss Vernon."

"Me, too, Shortland," said Jerry, impatient of a tension he couldn't understand. "I don't know the lady, old man, but I wish you luck."

"Thanks," replied Allan. He raised his cap again, Jerry waved a hand and pulled back a lever, and the car slid away. Beryl, her hands clasped very tightly in her lap, looked straight ahead at the onrushing road. Behind, a man and a dog followed slowly. The man whistled. The dog wagged his tail.





XVIII

BERYL awoke with a start, and with wide-open eyes stared into the half-darkness. A night-light in her mother's room sent a dim glow through the open doorway. The windows were wide open, and a tiny breeze was stirring the curtains. She was conscious of having been awakened by a sound, but all that was to be heard now was the clap of a horse's hoofs on the road, rapidly diminishing. With a sigh she settled herself again for slumber, but at that instant the bell in the tower of the little white church further along the village street began a wild alarm, and she sat up in bed and listened. She had never heard the

bell ring in the night before, and she told herself that it could mean but one thing—fire. Switching on the electric lamp on the night-stand, she looked at the face of the little clock, and saw that the time was a few minutes short of two. Then she had slipped from the bed and was peering anxiously into the darkness. Northward, above the neighboring trees, an orange radiance grew even as she looked. Somewhere an automobile-horn screeched ecstatically. The radiance broadened and deepened. It became a red glare, and objects below the window found shadows. A motor-car tore past the house, honking wildly. Further down the street a door banged shut and a dog barked. She left the window and hurried into the adjoining room.

“Mama dear,” she called, “wake up! There’s a fearful fire somewhere! You can see the light from the window!”

“Is that why that awful bell is ringing?” asked Mrs. Vernon sleepily. “It woke me out of a sound sleep. Where is the fire, Beryl?”

“I don’t know, but it must be one of the cottages. Come and see.”



Upstairs a door closed, and some one came tiptoeing down the steps. Beryl went to the door and peered out.

"Is that you, Perkins?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. There's a fire, ma'am."

"Do you know where it is, Perkins?"

"No, ma'am, but I think it must be the club-house. Would it be all right if I went, Miss? I might be able to help."

"The club-house? Oh, I hope not! Yes, go ahead, Perkins. Is Jennie awake?"

"Yes, Miss. Shall I call her?"

"No, run along, Perkins."

Beryl returned to the window and joined her mother. "Perkins thinks it's the club-house," she said excitedly. "Wouldn't that be awful?"

"Better the club-house than one of the cottages," replied Mrs. Vernon philosophically. "And it is too far that way to be a cottage, I think. Listen! You can hear the flames, Beryl!"

"Is there a fire department here?" Beryl asked.

"I don't know. I suppose there must be,



though. I do wish that horrid bell would stop ringing!"

Obligingly, at that moment it did stop, and in the succeeding silence the crackle of the distant flames, borne on the soft breeze, reached them distinctly. Voices sounded nearby and feet pattered along the sidewalk. The women crouched at the window and silently stared at the broadening effulgence beyond the trees and the nearer houses.

"It must be quite a serious fire, to make such a glare," said Mrs. Vernon presently, in an awed voice. "There's nothing in that direction except the club-house, is there?"

"Not as far away as that. Mama, I'm going!"

"Beryl, you're not! The idea!"

"Mama, I am! Will you come?"

"Certainly not!" declared her mother, with the utmost decision. "And I forbid you to!"

But Beryl had already hurried back to her room and switched the lights on. Mrs. Vernon followed her, protesting.

"It's no use, Mama," said Beryl. "It's too



exciting to stay away from. You'll have Jennie and cook here, so you won't be afraid."

"But I shall be," Mrs. Vernon complained. "And supposing the fire got over here!"

"Don't be absurd! It's half a mile away. You'd better call Jennie down, dear."

"You're not going like that!" exclaimed Mrs. Vernon in horrified tones. "It isn't decent! Besides, you might catch cold!"

"I shall put on my long ulster," replied Beryl, "and no one will know how many skirts I have on. If I stop to dress properly, I may be too late. Call Jennie, and—and don't impede the wheels of progress, Mama!"

"You ought to be spanked," said Mrs. Vernon helplessly.

"Very well, dear; when I come back. Now I'm off. I wish I'd told Perkins to wait for me. Good-by!"

And Beryl darted from the room and down the stairs. Mrs. Vernon heard the front door open and shut and ran to a window.

"Beryl! What have you on your feet?" she called into the flame-tinged darkness. A laughing voice replied from the street:

“Slippers, Mama!”

Mrs. Vernon looked eloquent despair at Cliquot, who, aroused by the confusion, was now barking wildly, and went to the hall. “Jennie!” she called.

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Come down here, please.”

“Yes, ma’am!” But Jennie’s tones held no enthusiasm until she volunteered, “You can see it fine from here, ma’am!”

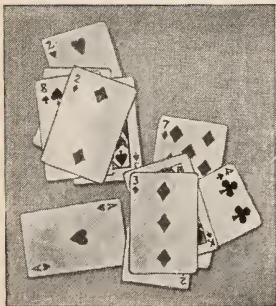
“Can you?” replied Mrs. Vernon. “Then—I’ll come up!”

With a heart that beat wildly from excitement and exertion, Beryl sped along the street and turned into the ascending road at the watering-trough. Ahead of her every object stood out black and distinct against the distant glow. There was no longer any doubt in her mind as to where the fire was. It could be only the club-house. Footsteps behind her caused her simultaneously to drop the hem of her steamer-coat and, of necessity, slacken her pace. Two men tore by her, puffing and blowing, and she lifted the impeding skirt again and followed at her best pace. But

bed-room slippers are not adapted for street-wear, and the pebbles hurt cruelly until, having reached the Prescotts' driveway, she turned in and, lighted by the glare, sped past the side of the house, through the sunken garden behind, and gained the links.

A quarter of a mile away, across the undulating field, the club-house was a mass of flames. Already one end of it showed in the red and orange glare like a blackened skeleton, and as she paused for an instant to catch her breath and look a portion of the roof fell with a crash, and a rush of sparks shot skyward. Then she went on, discovering half-way across the links that she had lost one of her slippers. The stubble hurt her stockinged feet, but she only laughed and gasped and kept on. A fringe of spectators, black against the furnace of flame, drew nearer and nearer, and presently, one of a dozen or more late arrivals hurrying from all points across the field, she joined the edge of the crowd.

On the other side of the burning building an asthmatic engine was hopelessly pumping water, and now and then a drenching shower



of spray came over the charring roof and scattered the onlookers. Beryl, fighting for breath, looked about her, and presently saw a group of cottagers ahead. Edging through the throng, she joined them: Mrs. Frazer and Mrs. Maynard and several more. Her advent was accepted as a matter of course, and Mrs. Maynard, wrapped in a man's rain-coat, with her red hair almost scarlet in the light, turned to her excitedly.

"Isn't it awful?" she cried delightedly.

"Awful!" echoed Beryl, with a laugh.

"We've been here for nearly half an hour," continued Mrs. Maynard proudly. "Joe saw the flames before the bell rang, and called me, and I put on just anything I could find. He wouldn't wait for me, though. He and Mr. Frazer and some of the others got a lot of the furniture out. Jerry Forbes saved nearly all the liquors, they say!" And Mrs. Maynard giggled shrilly.

"It took eight of them to get the billiard-table out," said another of the group. "I guess they saved a lot of things."

"Will it all go?" Beryl asked elatedly.



“Oh, I think so,” said Mrs. Frazer hopefully. “They’re trying to save the servants’ part, but they don’t seem to be doing it much.” She was very cheerful about it. One might have gathered from her tone that she would be seriously disappointed if they did. “Harry Russell had to climb down a ladder, and Mr. Smith had a terribly narrow escape, Tom said. I wish Tom would come back and tell us what’s happening. He and Mr. Shortland have been perfect heroes!”

“Well, I don’t think any one could have done more than Joe has done,” defended Mrs. Maynard. “He was almost the first one here. He and Tom had the big table out before Mr. Shortland came.”

Mrs. Frazer laughed. “Tom says that Major Prescott worked ten minutes pulling the telephone out by the roots! And then, when he had it loose, he threw it as far as he could out on to the grass.”

“Every one got out safely, I suppose?” asked Beryl.

“They think so,” replied Mrs. Maynard comfortably. “All the men got out, any way,

and the servants had lots of time, because their part didn't begin to go until long after it started. *What* are we going to do without the club-house?" And she beamed questioningly on Beryl.

"It will be perfectly awful without it," agreed Beryl almost exultantly. "Did the men lose all their clothing and things?"

"I don't know. Did you hear, Eleanor?"

"I think they got some things out," replied Mrs. Frazer. "Mr. Smith threw a steamer trunk from the window, and it burst open when it came down, and lots of things were lost. Harry Russell didn't know anything about it until they broke his door open, they say. Think of sleeping like that! Oh, see, they're putting a ladder up there!"

"What for, do you suppose?" some one asked.

"Some one's climbing up it! Why, he will get burned! I never heard of anything so foolhardy!"

The crowd ahead of them moved forward toward the servants' ell, and they followed. The heat was uncomfortable as they ap-

proached, and a stream of water fell about them in a shower.

“What’s he say?” suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Frazer excitedly.

“There’s some one in there!” cried Mrs. Maynard, turning horrified eyes to Beryl. “That man says they just saw some one at a window! They’re going up the ladder for him!”

“They’ll never be able to!” breathed Beryl, thinking aloud.

“This man says it’s the housekeeper!” Mrs. Frazer, who had been conversing hysterically with a villager, turned toward the others. “He says they saw her at that window on the end just a minute or two ago! Isn’t that terrible! The poor woman!”

“Mrs. Carrick!” exclaimed one of the group. “Why, I was talking to her just this morning! No, yesterday morning! She told me she had rheumatism very badly——”

A groan of disappointment went up from the watchers, for the two firemen, after climbing some two-thirds of the distance to the second-story window, were now in full re-

treat. Murmurs of horror arose as the news ran through the gathering. All sorts of advice was shouted. Unconsciously Beryl moved forward step by step, and presently had left Mrs. Frazer and the others and was sandwiched in between two men in the very front row of the watchers. The glare smote like a blow against her eyes, and the heat was almost scorching. At a little distance the firemen, volunteers from the neighboring town of Thompsonvale, were preparing again to attempt the rescue. A line of hose was brought around a corner, with much shouting and commotion, and a stream began to deluge the side of the burning ell. A falling beam in the gutted end of the building sent the watchers scurrying back as a shower of sparks leaped out from the glowing mass of débris. The men beside Beryl pushed past her, and she stumbled and the remaining bedroom slipper disappeared. There was no time to search for it, for the crowd pushed back again. A man with an axe appeared and began cutting away a window-sill. Another man seized the axe from his hand and energetically ripped off

clapboards until the hose, momentarily unmanageable, sent a stream against the back of his neck. Thereupon he dropped the axe, rescued his rolling helmet, and disappeared. Beryl found herself laughing weakly, one hand tightly clutching the elbow of a strange man, who was as unconscious of the fact as she. Then, with the hose playing about them, the two rescuers started again up the ladder.

Very slowly they went, the second, a man of short stature, continually stepping on the skirt of his long rubber coat. The flames, shooting out from crevices in the lower story, licked hungrily at them, while above, behind the closed window of the end room, a dull red gloom told that the fire was almost at the end of the building. Once, in spite of the hose, the ladder caught fire, and the second of the climbers, warned by the shouts, slid hurriedly to earth. The other man, pausing, looked up and down uncertainly, and then went on, rung after rung, until, just below the level of the window, he stopped and looked back. He seemed to be shouting something, but Beryl could not distinguish his words.

A third fireman, jamming his helmet firmly onto his head, started toward the foot of the ladder, only to be thrust aside as a man sprang past him and went nimbly up the rungs.

The new actor in the scene was hatless, and one arm showed white in the murk of smoke and spray where the sleeve of his coat had been torn away. His feet were shod in canvas shoes, and white shoes and white arm flashed rapidly as he climbed with the agility of a sailor until he had reached the window. Even then there was no hesitation, for he swung himself to the back of the ladder, passed the fireman, placed one knee on the window-ledge, and raised the lower sash. Then, squirming, he disappeared. Smoke rolled out of the window, smoke that was reddish-purple with the reflection of the flames inside. The fireman crouched there, one knee on the sill and one foot on the ladder, and waited. Now and then the stream from the hose, engulfing him, threatened to bring him toppling to earth. The throng, almost silent, waited and watched. It seemed many, many minutes to Beryl before the volunteer came

into sight again, although it was more a matter of seconds than minutes. Suddenly there was a lighter blur in the billowing smoke at the window, and a shout of relief went up from the crowd below. Something white—it might have been a long bundle—much too small, it seemed, to be a human being, was hauled and pushed through the window. The fireman held it while the other man crawled back to the ladder. Then, one below the other, the white bundle between them, they came slowly down, while the watching throng swayed forward with cheers and wordless sounds of acclaim. Others took the limp burden at the foot of the ladder, and the man in the canvas shoes was lost to sight in the throng.

Beryl, her eyes wet, pushed her way blindly back through the crowd. There was a dull ache in her breast, but, "I knew he was like that!" she told herself proudly.



"I KNEW HE WAS LIKE THAT!" SHE TOLD HERSELF PROUDLY



XIX

AN hour later the club-house was a glowing, smoking heap of charred timbers and débris, from which arose, like a memorial shaft, the tall stone chimney about whose hearth they had so often gathered. But regrets found no sincere expression yet, for the hysterical gayety that attends all catastrophes still held the throng. Out on the lawn, beyond the radius of singed turf, Allan had propped a door rescued from the ruins. Across the top he had printed with a charred stick on the blistered white paint:

CLUB HOUSE FUND!

Subscribe Now! All are Welcome!

Major Prescott had been permitted the honor of heading the list, and had set down the sum of five hundred dollars after his name. Others had followed, Allan among them, his donation equalling the Major's, and now, with the east just turning gray, nearly five thousand dollars had been pledged, a Committee on Building had been appointed, and the cottagers were moving away across the links toward the Frazers' house, where, it was announced, a Conflagration Breakfast was to be served.

Beryl had joined a group consisting of Mrs. Prescott, Mrs. Mellen, and Jerry Forbes, and with them she left the glowing ruins behind and struck across toward the Frazers'. Jerry had begged to be allowed to find shoes for her, but she had protested that she could get along quite well without them, and that she would borrow a pair from Mrs. Frazer. Behind them the sullen throb of the engine still sounded. It was not often that the Thompsonvale Fire Department had an opportunity to display its heroism, and now it meant to make the most of it. Ahead,



merry groups of hastily attired cottagers were dimly visible in the paling darkness, their laughing voices coming back on the still morning air. Beryl was rather silent, and Jerry, still in high spirits, failed to rouse her.

Once inside the house, the ladies hurried upstairs to repair or add to their bizarre costumes, while the men unanimously followed the host to the sideboard. The breakfast was a merry affair. Appetites were keen, and the excitement was not yet dulled. Steaming hot coffee, toast, broiled ham, eggs in various styles, and marmalade made up the hastily prepared repast, and every one helped himself and ate sitting or standing about the dining-room. Burton Bryant requisitioned a chafing-dish and many eggs and concocted a breath-taking dish which, because of the presence of much cayenne and mustard, was promptly dubbed Eggs à la Conflagration. Young Russell, who had lost most of his wearing apparel, had been supplied with clothes by Tom Frazer, and the sight of his protruding ankles and wrists caused much laughter. George Smith be-



moaned the loss of his shaving outfit, and begged advice as to whether to raise an imperial or side-whiskers. Allan, minus one sleeve of his coat, was said to have lost an arm, and was the recipient of appropriate sympathy. In their present keyed-up condition of mind, no one referred to his rescue of the housekeeper save jokingly. Later they tried hard to make a hero of him, a rôle he refused to assume. But that was when sober second thought had changed what now seemed a spectacular frolic into a distinct misfortune. Then a subscription was taken for the club employees, most of whom had lost their entire wardrobes; the men who had lodged in the club-house were apportioned to different cottages for the balance of the season; and the housekeeper, suffering from the shock of her experience, was removed to a hospital in Thompsonvale. But just now it was all a joke, and Alderbury laughed accordingly.

It was quite light outside before the ladies, yawning discreetly, began to slip away. Beryl, who had been fitted with a pair of pumps by Mrs. Frazer, refused Jerry Forbes'

petition to be allowed to see her home, and had started off with the Mellens when foot-steps on the walk caused her to look back. It was Allan. He had lost his cap, his white canvas shoes were water-soaked and soiled, and he had the appearance of one who, under an outer concession to the proprieties, is secretly guilty of strange unconventionalities! But in spite of that he looked fresh and cheerful and quite untroubled by any considerations of personal attire. Beryl and he had exchanged a few careless words at breakfast, but he had not sought her society. Now he overtook them and walked with them to the Mellens' gate. One might have thought from his manner that early morning fires, daring rescues, and four o'clock breakfasts were an everyday occurrence with him. Beryl declined an invitation to stop at the Mellens', and with a laughing "Good-night!" went on. Allan, striding along at her side, said nothing until they reached the little lane beyond the Mellens' lawn, which led back to the links. Then,

"Let's go this way," he said.



“But it’s much longer,” Beryl demurred.

“That,” he replied cheerfully, “is why I suggested it.”

“But really, Mr. Shortland, I don’t think I am properly dressed for an early morning ramble.” She tried to speak with severity, but failed.

“I don’t know,” he answered, “just what the proper costume is for an early morning ramble; but there is no one to see you but me, and I am quite satisfied.”

“Thanks,” she said dryly. Then she found that they were turning into the lane, through grass that was long and wet with dew and under the branches of wild apple trees that disputed their passage. They were both silent again until the level turf of the links was under their feet. Then, as they turned to walk along in the shadows of the trees there, Beryl said:

“I fear, Mr. Shortland, that all this is a poor preparation for your journey.”

“My journey? Oh, but I am not going. I’ve changed my mind.”

“Not going!” She was conscious of a swift

rush of happiness that caught at her heart like fingers, but she only laughed carelessly as she asked, "And what about poor Dobbin's hay-fever?"

"Dobbin," he answered gravely, "will be disappointed; but he is a philosopher and will get over it." He paused to pick up a lost golf-ball from the grass. Beryl waited while he examined it with deep interest. Finally, as he showed no inclination to continue the journey,

"Is it one of yours?" she asked.

"Mine?" he inquired vaguely.

"The ball, I mean."

"Oh! No, I think not," he replied abstractedly, dropping it into a pocket. "I'm not much of a golfer, Miss Vernon, but I can say proudly that when I lose a ball I do it thoroughly. It is never found again." He glanced about him. They were near the seventh green, and a wooden bench, knife-scarred and leaf-strewn, was set in the shade of the trees that crowded up to the boundary wall. "Shall we sit down over there a few minutes?" he asked.

"Certainly not, Mr. Shortland," she replied decidedly.

"I wish you would. You see, there is something I want to say to you. Don't you think that you could—just for five minutes?"

"You are absolutely ridiculous! The idea of sitting under the trees at—at—what time is it, please?"

"I don't know," he answered cheerfully. "I haven't my watch with me. Perhaps five o'clock, though. It really isn't late, Miss Vernon."

She laughed, hesitated, and viewed the bench dubiously.

"It looks very damp," she demurred.

"It is rather." He brushed the leaves from it, slipped off his coat, and spread it along one end of the bench.

"Please, Mr. Shortland! You'll catch cold. Besides, this ulster is quite thick. Please put it on again."

"If you wish." He donned his coat, and Beryl seated herself at one end of the bench. Before them the shadows of the trees stretched far across the dewy grass. Beyond the



shadows, the links were bathed in the pale gold of early sunlight. The chill of night had gone, and the fresh morning air, sweet with the scents of damp soil and verdure, was already tinged with warmth. The sounds of the waking world came to them softly: the clucking of a hen, the discordant challenge of a rooster, the faraway shriek of a locomotive. Pale blue-gray columns of smoke arose in the still air from neighboring chimneys, while, beyond the crest of an intervening rise, dun-colored vapor hovered above the scene of the catastrophe.

“We’ll all miss the club-house dreadfully,” murmured Beryl, stealing a glance at the silent Allan.

“Yes.”

“Does any one know,” she continued after a moment, “how the fire started?”

“They think from the electric wires.” There was another long moment of silence, and then, “Miss Vernon,” he said, “I wish you’d tell me what you meant yesterday when you—congratulated me.”

“Why, only what—one usually means, Mr.

Shortland, when one offers congratulations," she replied lightly.

"You said you had heard I was to be married. Will you tell me where you heard it?"

"I think—Mr. Smith was the informant. Has he been indiscreet?"

"Smith? And did he happen to give his authority, Miss Vernon?"

"Oh, yes! He said you had announced the fact at the club."

"I had?" He looked puzzled. "Did he say when?"

"Soon after you came, I believe. Does it matter very much?" she added indifferently.

"No, I suppose not. He was a trifle previous, however. It is a bit startling, you know, to be informed that you are to be married when you aren't at all assured of the fact yourself."

"But—but didn't you tell him?" asked Beryl.

"Not exactly. I did make the remark one day that I was thinking of being married. I'd forgotten it, though. I forget what led up to it."

“How queer!” said Beryl, elaborately careless. “He even said you had met the—the lady abroad; in Florence.”

“Really? I might have said I met her abroad, but I surely didn’t say in Florence, because, as a matter of fact, it was Venice.”

“Oh!” The exclamation was a bit startled. “But you said yesterday that you were going to be—be——”

“Married? Yes, I did. I had just found it out.”

“Then—my congratulations were not out of order, after all, were they?” Beryl was interestedly viewing the tip of one of Mrs. Frazer’s pumps.

“Not at all. I only hope you won’t regret the congratulations or—or want to retract them when you learn who the lady is.”

“Why should I, Mr. Shortland?”

“You shouldn’t. I devoutly hope you won’t.”

“I’ll promise not to,” she said gayly. “Although I fancy that my congratulations are not—well, absolutely necessary, Mr. Shortland.”



“At least, your good wishes are,” he replied gravely.

“I am flattered! If it will make you any happier, I assure you that you have them.”

“It makes me a great deal happier. I am also distinctly relieved. You see, Miss Vernon, to marry a girl without having her good wishes in the matter would—well, it would be the very deuce, wouldn't it?”

“We were—speaking of my good wishes, weren't we?” she asked. “I fail to see how they can affect the affair one way or another, Mr. Shortland.”

“Then, you haven't guessed the identity of the young lady who is to do me the honor of becoming my wife?” he returned cheerfully.

“I am not a very good guesser, Mr. Shortland. Am I to understand that she is some one I know?”

“Yes.”

“Well?”

“Well?”

“If you want me to guess, you must tell me more than that, Mr. Shortland. I told you I was not a good guesser.”

“I met her in Venice four years ago, Miss Vernon, and fell in love with her quickly and irrevocably. Unfortunately I lost her for a time, but, Fortune aiding, found her again two months ago. In the meanwhile she had become engaged to another man, had broken the engagement, and when I recovered her was suffering from a broken—pride.”


“Mr. Shortland!”

“Just a moment more! She thought her trouble was a broken heart, but I was fortunately able to show her that she was mistaken. She acknowledges it now quite frankly——”

“I—I——”

“—Realizing that she was never really in love with the other chap. As, however, the course of true love never did run smooth, I had some difficulty in convincing her that she cared for me enough to marry me. In fact, it was not until I had been forced to set fire to a perfectly good club-house in order to secure an uninterrupted talk with her that she at last consented.”

“I haven't! And—and I never will!” She



faced him with scarlet cheeks and mutinous eyes. "You treat me as though—as if—as if I was a joke! I—I hate you!"

"You promised me your good wishes," he said plaintively.

She made no answer. With hands clasped very tightly in her lap, she was staring across the sunlit field. After a moment he went on softly:

"Dear, if I have seemed to make a joke of it, it is because I—I haven't dared to be serious! I'm the kind who keep their courage up by laughing, dear, and—and I'm scared to death! If you would only look at me, you'd see that it's very far from being a joke, Beryl."

Very slowly a pair of rebellious violet eyes turned toward him. What they saw must have moved her, for they fled away with fluttering lashes.

"But—but you were going away," she murmured.

"And I should have come back again," he said gently. "I didn't want to go, dear, but you treated me unkindly, even, as I thought,

a little unfairly, and—and I couldn't quite stand it."

"I thought—they said——" she stammered.

"But I'd already told you, Beryl."

She nodded, staring at the tip of a shoe that peeked from under the edge of her long gray coat. "I thought perhaps you had—changed your mind," she whispered. "I'd been very mean and ugly to you, you see."

"Why?" he asked.

She shook her head and was silent a moment. Then, with a fleeting glance at him, "I think," she said softly, with a hint of laughter in her voice, "it was because—because I was—beginning to and didn't want to!"

"Beginning to——" he questioned eagerly.

"A—a little," she nodded.

He reached forward and covered the clasped hands with one of his. "Beryl," he said softly, "you told me once that you were going to call me the Happy Man, and I said I'd rather you made me that. Will you, dear? Are you going to make me a happy man, the very happiest man in the world?"

"If—if you want me to," she answered simply.

"If I want you to!" he sighed. He drew one slim hand toward him and slipped something on to a finger. She looked at it, raised her eyes to his with a shy smile, and murmured:

"My ring!"

"Your ring, sweetheart, the ring you pledged yourself to me with four years ago."

"Did I?" she asked.

"Didn't you? See for yourself!" He laughed happily.

"I suppose—I must have," she agreed.

"Beryl!" he whispered. His eyes were drawing very close to hers. The morning world was still, so still it seemed to them that the throbbing of their hearts was the only sound in it. And it was a very beautiful world; a world of dazzlingly blue sky, of golden sunlight, of cool mauve shadows, of sparkling jewels on leaf and stem; a wonderful world of radiance and fragrance and love.

Later, the sun having meanwhile climbed

above the tree-tops, they paused once more in their slow homeward journey, as though loath to leave this green and golden realm of romance, paused in the rose-fragrant shadow of the Prescotts' gate. Once beyond that, they must needs unclasp their hands and walk apart, an exaction poignantly tragic. For a girl who had had but a few hours of sleep, whose hair was in wild disorder, whose feet and ankles were soaking wet, and whose attire was lacking in both detail and conventionality, Beryl looked strangely happy and very lovely, and, considering the fact that they were in fair view of the Prescotts' upper windows, displayed a fine disregard for consequences. . . .

"You called me once," he said, "a dawdler and a harlequin. Do you remember?"

She nodded, her eyes suing for forgiveness.

"And you are still willing to marry a man who is—all those things?"

She nodded again, smilingly, emphatically. "I wouldn't want you changed a mite," she declared. "Harlequins are—very nice." And, after a moment, "I suppose," she con-

tinued in simulated despair, and with a sigh, "you'll soon be running off to China again and leaving me all alone."

"There will be no more running off, dear," he answered, "for I have found what I was searching for."

"Really?" she asked, pretending perplexity. "And what is that?"

He took her into his arms again, in front of seven staring windows.

"My Heart's Content," he whispered.



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